The New Criterion

February 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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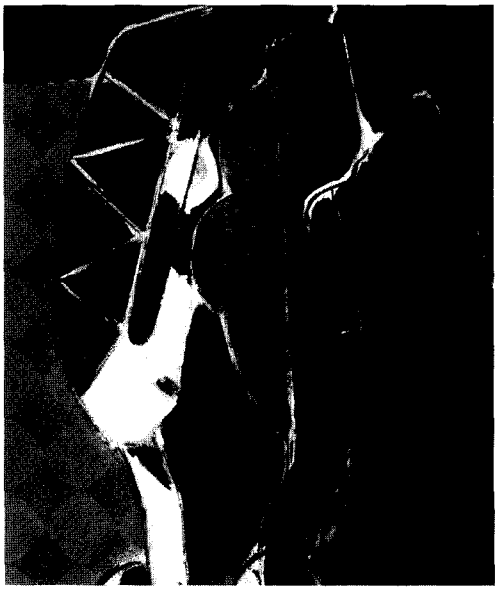

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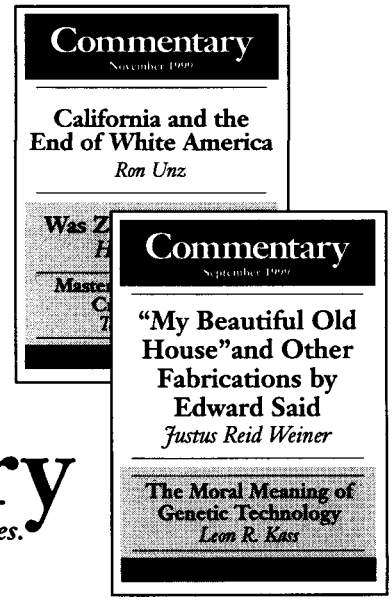
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Commentary

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Notes & Comments: February 2000

Oh, the poor, innocent child

Bertie in particular sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was quite simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally.
—J. M. Keynes on Bertrand Russell

Utopians have always been impatient with human nature. How could they not be? Utopians come full of dreams of a better tomorrow; human nature—shot through with imperfections, seemingly addicted to irrationality—is the biggest impediment to the fulfillment of those dreams. The obvious solution is to change (alter, transform, transcend: the list of verbs is long) human nature. It should be such a simple matter. Social pathologies (say the utopians) occur because people act in a bad way. Beginning tomorrow, then, let them act in a good way and all will be well. So many families are dysfunctional. Very well, let us do away with, or at the very least soften, the influence of the bad old nuclear family, and have the enlightened state step in and help raise children in a rational manner. Everyone will then be happy and well adjusted. Private property perpetuates invidious distinctions among people. Very well, let us abolish or at least attenuate private property: tax it, tax it, tax it, if there is for the moment too much resistance to abolishing it outright, and then at last inequality will be a thing of the past.

Alas, to their own and especially to the world's sorrow, utopians, malign and benign alike, have discovered time and again that things are not as simple as they might seem. Human nature, so malleable in certain respects, turns out to be extraordinarily recalcitrant on just those points where it most wants improvement. And when it comes to immensely complex institutions like the family and private property, history has taught us that efforts to improve or replace them nearly always cause more misery than they relieve.

We misspoke. For history has obviously taught us no such thing. Experience *should* have taught us the folly of utopian scheming. But has that lesson ever really been assimilated? Perhaps, as Winston Churchill said of democracy, the family and private property are the worst possible social arrangements—except for all of the others. But that is not something utopians, in their heart of hearts, can ever bring themselves to acknowledge. It didn't work last time, they say, because people weren't sufficiently in earnest. The state wasn't quite activist enough; irrational attachments like family and private property were not adequately

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"rationalized"; the program was not sufficiently encompassing; it was not sufficiently funded. Next time the program will be larger, better funded, more strictly enforced, mandatory for everyone . . .

We were prompted to these melancholy reflections by "Schools Are Not the Answer," an extraordinary utopian effusion by James Traub in the January 16 issue of *The New York Times Magazine.* Education, of course, has long been a liberal and a utopian nostrum. Is crime a problem? Education is the answer. Is poverty a problem? Education is the answer. Is teen pregnancy a problem? Education is the answer. Are belligerence, war, smoking, general nastiness, and impolite behavior problems? Education is the answer. Or so we have been told.

Mr. Traub presents himself as a semi-chastened utopian. He knows that education heretofore hasn't done the job, despite the billions upon billions that have been spent, the myriad programs, initiatives, social experiments, remedial efforts, government interventions, equalizing mandates, armies of experts, educationists, reformers, and reporters from *The New York Times.* Still, even now, there are great gaps between rich and poor, white and black, the haves and the have-nots. Reluctantly, Mr. Traub admits that—notwithstanding Head Start, Title I, and the whole menu of Great Society efforts—the evidence shows that "money does not buy educational equality." Well, he half admits it. For he hastens to add that "we are talking about an enormous social experiment that is quite new; it is scarcely surprising that the first round of educational reforms didn't work very well." So what is to be done? The issue, Mr. Traub thinks, is that although "there is reason to believe that schools can make some kind of difference, . . . right now they are not making nearly enough."

> Most children do not encounter school until age 5, unless they happen to be in an unusually rigorous preschool program. Anyone who has ever reared a child knows how immense, and lasting, are the effects of those first five years. Nor is school quite as all-encompassing as it seems: academic work typically takes up only about half the time that children spend in school. And whom you hang out with, both during and after school, can matter more than what happens in the classroom.

Mr. Traub then goes on to describe various programs in the U.S. and Europe that attempt (in the words of one expert Mr. Traub cites) to change "the ecology of the lower-class child" in order to equalize educational and behavioral outcomes. "Ecology" is a nice word, calculated to appeal to the environmental instincts of Mr. Traub's audience. But what, exactly, does he have in mind? *Part* of what he has in mind are programs like Impact, "a multipurpose social-service agency, offering year-round, all-day child care from birth, adult literacy programs, episodic health care, including mental health, and education and counseling for pregnant teenagers." Such programs, Mr. Traub admits, "are very expensive"; making something like Impact available universally would cost "hundreds of billions." But the French already have universal public education that starts when a child is 3. "Can we," Mr. Traub asks, "think of a good reason it shouldn't here?" We can think of many such reasons, beginning with the "hundreds of billions" of dollars that Mr. Traub casually conjures out of the air (i.e., out of the taxpayer's pocket) and ending with the fact that such utopian schemes have never achieved what they set out to achieve.

Mr. Traub notes in passing that "the language of personal responsibility makes many liberals flinch." This is quite true. But what are we to make of his proposal that conservatives and liberals strike a bargain according to which "conservatives agree to pay for comprehensive institutions like Impact or

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for after-school activities and liberals agree to embrace the language of personal responsibility"? In other words, conservatives pay and pay and pay while liberals get to employ virtuous-sounding rhetoric. Any takers?

In a revealing aside early on in his essay, Mr. Traub says that the idea that "schools by themselves can't cure poverty not only sounds like an un-American vote of no confidence in our capacity for self-transformation but also seems to flirt with the racialist theories expressed by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, who argued in *The Bell Curve* that educational inequality is rooted in biological inequality." *The Bell Curve* is a book that liberals love to hate, but it is no more "racialist" than is human nature itself. It is a sober-minded, statistically sophisticated study whose conclusions run counter to the prevailing liberal ideology. Hence its arguments must be ruled unworthy of discussion, and the easiest way to accomplish that is by declaring them to be "racialist," i.e., racist.

Mr. Traub, like many liberals, is deeply troubled by the spectacle of ineradicable human inequality. He wants education to come to the rescue, and if traditional schooling doesn't do the trick he is willing to call in the state to take over "from birth" or at least from the age of three. Then at last the cognitive and behavioral gap between poor inner-city children and middle-class ones would be abolished and equality would reign. To which we respond with Dostoevsky's words:

> Oh, tell me, who first declared, who first proclaimed that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own real interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else. . . . Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child!

"The Smithsonian of sex"

The New York Times has been full of good news lately. A couple of days after Mr. Traub's socialist fantasia appeared, the front page of the Arts section announced plans for a Museum of Sex, to be located at Fifth Avenue and Twenty-seventh Street in Manhattan. The new institution—which is looking for a temporary home while waiting for its new building—is the brainchild of Daniel Gluck, whom the *Times* describes as a thirty-one-year-old "former product manager for a software company." Mr. Gluck has been trying to found a Museum of Sex—devoted to "the history and evolution of human sexuality"—for three years. He had trouble incorporating as a non-profit insitution, he said, because "the New York Board of Regents . . . said the term Museum of Sex made a mockery of the institution of a Museum." Quite right, too, though these days such mockery is common enough. In any case, Mr. Gluck was undaunted and managed to put together private funding and even attract the donation of art works from Peter and Eileen Norton, Californian collectors who recently announced that they were giving away some 1000 works to various museums. Mr. Gluck explained that "people don't necessarily know what we mean by sex objects." He mentioned Victorian "anti-masturbation devices" and "bundling boards." But the object he wants most for the collection, the *Times* reported, is Monica Lewinsky's blue dress. If it were April 1, we would suspect that the whole thing was some ghastly joke. Unfortunately, Mr. Gluck seems quite in earnest about creating what he called "the Smithsonian of sex." Have we finally passed beyond parody, beyond satire? The Museum of Sex. What could Juvenal, Jonathan Swift, or Evelyn Waugh say of us that we haven't already said of ourselves?

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Little god, big Wilson

by Roger Kimball

A passionate tumultuous age will overthrow everything, pull everything down; but a revolutionary age, that is at the same time reflective and passionless, transforms that expression of strength into a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance. Instead of culminating in a rebellion it reduces the inward reality of all relationships to a reflective tension which leaves everything standing but makes the whole of life ambiguous: so that everything continues to exist factually whilst by a dialectical deceit, privatissime, *it supplies a secret interpretation—that it does not exist.*

—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt.

—T. S. Eliot on Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

When Alcibiades defected from Athens to Sparta at the height of the Sicilian Expedition, one of the things that made his treachery so effective was that he knew the Athenian military strategy intimately from within. Having himself been a commander of the Athenian forces, he understood exactly what Sparta should do to inflict maximum damage on Athens's interests. It would be unfair in all sorts of ways to compare the English writer A. N. Wilson to Alcibiades—"the most complete example," Sir Edward Creasy remarked in 1851, "of genius without principle that history produces, the Bolingbroke of antiquity"—and I have no intention of doing so. But there is a peculiarity about Wilson's latest book, *God's Funeral*[1] that kept reminding me of someone who, feeling betrayed, switches sides and sets out to avenge himself on his former compatriots. Wilson's announced subject in *God's Funeral* is "the demise of faith among the Victorians"—less, he explains, "the end of a phase of human intellectual history" than "the withdrawal of a great Love-object." And Wilson himself, as one reviewer put it, is "a lapsed orthodox Anglican." (At one time he even studied for the clergy.) In *God's Funeral*, this interesting conjunction of lapsed orthodoxy and lost love yields a species of intellectual history in which arrogance infects the exposition and professed admiration often betrays a current of contempt.

Of course, that is not the whole story. A. N. Wilson is an engaging and knowledgeable writer—a notably prolific one as well. In addition to having written a shelf of novels (*Wise Virgin*, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, *Daughters of Albion*, etc.), the fifty-year-old Wilson is also the author of something like a dozen biographies: of Milton, Hilaire Belloc, C. S. Lewis, St. Paul, Jesus, and Tolstoy, among others. He is also an inescapable presence in English journalism, producing with indefatigable regularity articulate, quirkily Toryish columns for various quality papers.

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1 *God's Funeral*, by A. N. Wilson; W. W. Norton, 402 pages, $27.95.

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It is not surprising that such prodigious output often lends Wilson's excursions in intellectual history an intermittently potted quality. It would be surprising were this not the case. Much of *God's Funeral*, in any event, shows signs of hasty digestion, though in this book as elsewhere the verve of Wilson's rhetoric helps to mitigate—or at least distract attention from—its summary, swotted-up character. But because the subject of *God's Funeral* continues to resonate powerfully, it is worth following the course of its argument with some care.

Wilson takes his title and his theme from Thomas Hardy's poem depicting a "slow-stepping" cortege that bears "A strange and mystic form" to its last resting place, "toward our myth's oblivion." As originally published, in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1912, "God's Funeral" bore the subtitle "An Allegorical Conception/ Of the Present State of Theology." Wilson doesn't mention this, but the subtitle suggests, I think, that the poem may be read as a somberly ironical commentary on those proclaiming the death or absence of God as much as a declaration of disbelief on the part of the narrator. In any event, the tone of "God's Funeral" is one of profound bereavement, not triumph. The narrator notes that in the background are "Sweet women, youths, men, all incredulous,/ Who chimed: 'This is a counterfeit of straw,/ This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!'" But he sadly acknowledges that

> I could not buoy their faith: and yet
> Many I had known: with all I sympathized;
> And though struck speechless, I did not forget
> That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

The emotional center of "God's Funeral" comes near the end when the narrator confesses that "how to bear such loss I deemed/ The insistent question for each animate mind."

One may plausibly contend that this was Hardy's "insistent question," too. Certainly, it stands at the spiritual core of several of the figures whom Wilson discusses. Wilson wants us to think that it is *his* question as well. On every other page, more or less, it may well be. There is, however, a vertiginous quality to *God's Funeral*. It runs on at least two opposing tracks. The book is shot through with nostalgia for religious belief; but it is a bitter, one might even say vengeful, nostalgia. Wilson seems to have found himself not so much at God's funeral, but at home in his library fantasizing about the ceremony and the wake that followed. What worries him, it seems, is not Hardy's "insistent question" but the fact that, to him, the question no longer speaks peremptorily.

In form, *God's Funeral* is a straightforward exercise in intellectual history, covering, and supplementing, some of the same ground as studies like J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963). After some preliminary discussion of Hardy's poem, Wilson begins his investigation of "the Victorian disease, Doubt." He early on tells the paradigmatic story of Leslie Stephen (the great literary biographer and father of Virginia Woolf) who, in 1875, asked Hardy to visit him in his study no matter how late the hour. Seventeen years earlier, Stephen had been ordained as a clergyman in the Church of England but had since lost his faith. Late that night, Hardy arrived to find Stephen highly agitated, pacing up and down his room. On a table was a legal document. Stephen wanted the agnostic Hardy to witness his signature severing his ties with the church.

Seeking the sources of the Victorian religious crisis—which in many ways is still *our* crisis—Wilson steps back (in "Hume's Time Bomb") to the eighteenth century and David Hume's skeptical musings about religion in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) and to Edward Gibbon's disillusioning portrait of early Christendom in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788). Both works, Wilson notes, had a profoundly dispiriting effect on many believers. This, of course, is a commonplace observation; but Wilson is fearless in purveying commonplace

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observations. He then proceeds to offer a few pages on most of the usual suspects and one or two unusual ones. A chapter called "The Religion of Humanity" introduces readers to the founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, and his disciples Mill, James and John Stuart, as well as their French mentor, Auguste Comte, the self-proclaimed founder of the "Religion of Humanity" (who liked, Wilson tells us, to be addressed as "La Fondateur de la réligion universelle, Grand Prêtre de l'Humanité").

Wilson also discusses Thomas Carlyle, "an embodiment of the Victorian dilemma about God." He deals especially with Carlyle's dense, almost unreadable, masterpiece *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle wanted to believe, but could not; nor could he subsist in simple unbelief; so, Wilson writes, he "spoke and wrote *as if* God were true, manifesting Himself less in the miraculous and unbelievable tales of religious mythology than in the inexorable workings of History." Wilson spares a few pages each for those other apostles of "the inexorable workings of History itself," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, neither of whom entertained any doubts—let alone Doubt—but whose militant atheism greatly influenced later generations.

Wilson reminds readers of the devastating influence of the nineteenth-century German Biblical criticism and biographical investigations into the life of Jesus—of what happens when the Bible is transformed from scripture into an object of disinterested, scholarly investigation. He dilates particularly on David Friedrich Strauss's famous *Das Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus"), which George Eliot translated early on in her career and which did a great deal to undermine popular belief. George Eliot herself naturally figures prominently in Wilson's story, as does one of the many objects of Eliot's infatuation, "funny old Herbert Spencer" ("this pompous ass," in Wilson's epithet), the author of scores of influential tomes (*The Principles of Psychology*, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy*, *Man Versus the State*, etc., etc.)—influential at the time, now utterly unread.

In a chapter called "Science"—by far the weakest in the book—Wilson has a few pages on the shattering effect of Darwinism (represented especially by "Darwin's bulldog," T. H. Huxley) and Charles Lyell's geological investigations. (The fossil record was a great challenge to Victorian piety.) He discusses Algernon Charles Swinburne, "the laureate of mid-nineteenth-century unbelief," who was fond of writing lines like "the supreme evil, God" (which Christina Rossetti crossed out of her copy of *Atalanta in Calydon*). Wilson also discusses John Henry Newman ("self-obsessed") and Matthew Arnold ("intellectually snobbish," "pathologically anti-British"), both of whom he loathes, and John Ruskin, who engages his affection.

About William James, to whom Wilson devotes an entire chapter, he apparently feels deep ambivalence. On one page he approvingly quotes James's opinion that religion, "like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse . . . adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else." On the next page, he writes, "there is in fact quite a strange mixture of belligerence and what you could call Emersonian moonshine in James's religious philosophy." Wilson quotes (in a chapter called "In the Name of the Father") some amusing, Tom-Sawyerish bits from Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907)—another of the "great texts of Victorian unbelief." He reminds readers of the sad case of Samuel Butler, whose posthumously published *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) was—to quote the philosopher David Stove quoting Malcolm Muggeridge—"the first hand grenade thrown over the Victorian garden wall, before the Freudian heavy artillery came up." And Wilson recalls the explosions Freud himself set off with his theories about ineluctable family conflict that "prepared us for a generation who would think it virtuous to sue their parents in a court of law, or blame them for all the miseries of existence." Wilson concludes with a chapter called "The

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Modernist Experiment." This deals not with the modernism of Pound or Joyce or Eliot but with the effort by certain Roman Catholics in the 1890s and early 1900s (Baron von Hügel, George Tyrrell, Alfred Loisy) to inject an observant but doctrinally latitudinarian element into Catholic practice. Wilson has considerable sympathy for Catholic Modernism, if only because it so irritated the nineteenth-century Vatican ("the great powerhouse of reaction"), for which he seems to nurture a special detestation.

God's Funeral is at its best when considered as a collection of anecdotes. Wilson is widely read, and he brings a novelist's eye for absurdity to the characters he discusses. Even in retelling familiar stories—the horrible tale of John Stuart Mill's childhood, for instance: Greek at three, Latin at eight, nary a toy in sight—he manages to enliven them with some new detail or narrative freshness. And one cannot be reminded too often of how absurd and megalomaniacal a figure was Auguste Comte, not only the "fondateur" of the Religion of Humanity but also (and not, perhaps, coincidentally) the inventor of sociology. Comte wanted to turn Notre Dame into a temple to his new religion, replete with newly minted rituals and sacraments. Having set up house with Caroline Massin, a prostitute he had once patronized and then rediscovered in a bookshop, Comte descended into periodic bouts of madness. During one such episode, he came to believe that he was an Homeric hero and began hurling knives around his apartment. Caroline patiently nursed him through his dementia rather than consign him to an asylum. Comte was eventually prevailed upon to marry Caroline in the church. Caroline's reward, Wilson writes, "was persistent vilification from Comte, who filled his voluminous political and philosophical pamphlets with paranoid denunciations of his wife, and embarrassingly explicit rehearsals of her earlier career."

Wilson's book is full of such set pieces:

> It will be recalled that when [Queen Victoria] was dying, and contemplating the various dignitaries whom she might be expected to receive at her first Levee in Heaven, a clergyman told her that she would be in Abraham's bosom. "We will *not* meet Abraham," she pronounced solemnly. The patriarch's behaviour in Genesis, Chapter xii, when he pretended to the Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister rather than his wife, thinking the sacrifice of her virtue to the Egyptian potentate preferable to the offering of his own life, put Abraham decidedly beyond the pale. One could not imagine a man who behaved like that being made welcome at Balmoral.

Wilson also provides a running descant of asides: "When George Eliot complimented Spencer on the lack of wrinkles in his forehead, he replied that nothing ever really puzzled him." Wilson's wreaths of anecdote and eccentricity greatly enliven *God's Funeral*; they also threaten to overwhelm its claims to seriousness. In part, Wilson seems to have pursued a strategy of intellectual and spiritual emasculation through trivializing detail. The more he expatiates on the smallness, the venality, the absurdity of the figures he discusses, the less seriously need we take their spiritual struggles.

There are at least two A. N. Wilsons present in *God's Funeral*. One is the former theology student who knows all about the inner springs of belief. "The God-question," he says in his preface, "does not go away." Spiritual hunger does not disappear "because so many, in the churches and the universities, seem incapable of understanding what is really at stake." At least since Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841)—"The Essence of Christianity," another book that the young George Eliot translated—skeptics have dismissed religion as a "projection" of humanity's fears or aspirations. But, Wilson asks,

> if some religion, or all religion, is "just a projection" . . . then would it not be the projection of the most fundamental of our concerns? Would not the discarding of this projection have calamitous psychological ef-

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> fects? And what if the analysis was in any event wrong? What if the literalists or the fundamentalists of both sides were the false guides, and the truth lay elsewhere, in those mysterious and linguistic areas which the simple-minded would like to dismiss as wishy-washy or fudge?

In this context, Wilson approvingly quotes Goethe: "Let us seek to fathom those things that are fathomable, and reserve those things which are unfathomable for reverence in quietude."

The other Wilson can sometimes sound like his alter ego: "In the actual business of life, in grief, fear, and sorrow, men and women and children say their prayers and find themselves comforted. This continues, whatever the unbelievers may wish to say about the sheer irrationality of the practice." The sheer irrationality of the practice? Here we discern the voice of Wilson the disabused, "enlightened," intellectual. Wilson refers several times to the writings of G. K. Chesterton. He does not, however, quote Chesterton's observation that "the madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason." As Chesterton knew, a view of life that systematically attempted to exclude or transcend the irrational would itself be, perhaps paradoxically, highly irrational in the sense that it would be deeply inhospitable to our humanity. The Victorian essayist Walter Bagehot—a hearty soul generally unassailed by Doubt—put this point well in his essay "The First Edinburgh Reviewers" (1855):

> A clear, precise, discriminating intellect shrinks at once from the symbolic, the unbounded, the indefinite. The misfortune is that mysticism is true. There are certainly kinds of truth, borne in as it were instinctively on the human intellect, most influential on the character and heart, yet hardly capable of stringent definition. Their course is shadowy; the mind seems rather to have seen than to see them, more to feel after than definitely apprehend them. They commonly involve an infinite element, which of course cannot be stated precisely, or else a first principle—an original tendency—of our intellectual constitution, which it is impossible not to feel, and yet which it is hard to extricate in terms and words.

"The misfortune is that mysticism is true": this is the crux that Wilson has difficulty accommodating. A phrase that recurs often in *God's Funeral* is "intellectual honesty." People might still be religious, Wilson acknowledges, but only because of an "irrational" spiritual hunger. At least since Nietzsche announced that "God is dead," intellectuals have assured one another that belief was mere credulousness. "Since Nietzsche we know . . ." "Freud taught us that . . ." "Marx showed the world . . ." "Darwin made it impossible . . ." Wilson provides a good sample of the genre in his chapter on William James:

> The skeptical inferences so wittily sketched by David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* do not merely make us doubt the God of the eighteenth-century Deists; they kill him stone dead. And if anyone should turn around and say, "We do not believe in the God of the Deists, we believe in the revealed God of Scripture," then the German biblical critics destroyed *Him*. And in case anyone should turn from the God of the Bible and say that there is still some mileage in the Argument from Design, and in a nature-mysticism which claims a knowledge of God from the shape and pattern of Nature, Darwinism removes not merely the necessity of supposing a Designer, but its very plausibility.

To which one may reply, "Really?" A certain kind of philosopher assures us that Hume's famous arguments against induction made it impossible for us ever again to have absolute confidence in inductive reasoning. The fact that a lighted match (to use Hume's example) was hot yesterday is no grounds for believing it will be hot today. Do you, dear reader, have any serious doubts on the subject? Hume himself later

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ridiculed the juvenile quality of such "pretended skepticism." In such matters, is not the argument from experience finally more persuasive—more rational, more "intellectually honest"—than an argument based on someone's theory about the way the world must be? Hume never extended such restorative skepticism about skepticism to religion—indeed, he explicitly declined to—but that is no reason why we shouldn't follow his lead and do so ourselves.

There are few things that intellectuals fear more than being thought naïve. And yet that very fear is often an impediment to apprehending the truth. Indeed, it may be the ultimate naïveté to think that one can encounter the truth—to say nothing of salvaging one's humanity—without regular recourse to the simple receptiveness of something very like naïveté. Wilson, like many modern prophets of suspicion, tells us that religion has, strictly speaking, become incredible in the wake of thinkers like Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud. *God's Funeral* is meant to provide a dramatic enactment of how that supposed impossibility surfaced in the lives of certain Victorian writers. It does this quite well. But it does so at the expense of the larger religious issues Wilson raises. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski once observed,

> religion is not a set of propositions, it is the realm of worship wherein understanding, knowledge, the feeling of participation in the ultimate reality (whether or not a personal god is meant) and moral commitment appear as a single act, whose subsequent segregation into separate classes of metaphysical, moral, and other assertions might be useful but is bound to distort the sense of the original act.

Wilson says many things which suggest that he agrees with Kolakowski. But he then takes it all back with declarations about the impossibility of honest faith in the modern age. "The truth," he says in his preface "can't be resisted, of course"—meaning the truths furnished by science and scholarship in explaining various things about the way the world works. In one sense he is correct. The truths of science *are* irresistible when the question is "How?" or "What?" When one ventures upon "Why?," however, science is no guide at all. To think otherwise is to make a fetish out of science, to transform it from an instrument of knowledge into an instrument of mystification: scientism, not science. It is curious that Nietzsche, the great enemy of Christianity who, after he went mad, took to signing himself "the Anti-Christ," should have seen this with such clarity. "Science," Nietzsche wrote in an early essay,

> probes the processes of nature, but it can never *command* men. Science knows nothing of taste, love, pleasure, displeasure, exaltation, or exhaustion. Man must in some way *interpret*, and thereby evaluate, what he lives through and experiences. Religions gain their power by being *standards of value*, criteria. An event appears in a different light when looked at from the point of view of myth. Religious interpretations have this to be said for them: that they measure life according to human ideals.

Discussing Benjamin Jowett, the famous master of Balliol and translator of Plato, Wilson tells us he exhibited "that rather attractive mixture, a person of profound religious feeling and a skeptical cast of mind." It is clearly a commendation that Wilson wishes for himself. Wilson really is a man of profound religious sensibility. But in his desire to appear sufficiently skeptical—sufficiently clever—he has allowed smugness to blunt that sensibility and warp his judgment. In his discussion of Matthew Arnold, Wilson imagines what would have happened had God been called upon to review Arnold's *Literature and Dogma*. The results are not favorable to Arnold. But what if God were asked to review *God's Funeral*? The notice, I fancy, would be short—a single line, perhaps, quoted from another notable skeptic: "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

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Hazlitt & Wordsworth: the language of poetry

by Martin Greenberg

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power.
—William Hazlitt, essay on *Coriolanus*

William Hazlitt (1778–1830) was a democrat in his youth, along with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, his contemporaries in England's first Romantic generation. Unlike them he was a democrat still when he died. He stood on the side of "the people and . . . the people's rights," he said in the preface to his *Political Essays* (1819), "against those who say they have no rights, that they are the property, the goods, the chattels, the livestock on the estate of Legitimacy." Hazlitt defended the revolution in France not only in its early constitutional phase, which most Englishmen did, but also in its Jacobin and Napoleonic phases, during the long period of Britain's war with France and the fearful Tory reaction (fearful of French ideas and French invasions). His partisanship wasn't blind. He admired Napoleon, he doted on him, yet he allowed that he was a tyrant—but "he was not . . . a tyrant by right divine. Tyranny in him was not sacred: it was not eternal: it was not sanctioned by all the laws of religion and morality." Hazlitt wrote much about politics but disclaimed being a politician and still more "a party-man." Obviously he was no Tory. But neither was he a Whig:

> A modern Whig is but a fag-end of a Tory. The old Whigs [who opposed the war with France] were in principle what the modern Jacobins are, anti-Jacobites, that is, opposers of the doctrine of divine right, the one in the soil of England, the other by parity of reasoning, in the soil of France.

Nor was he a reformer. "A Reformer never is—but always to be blest, in the accomplishment of his airy hopes and shifting schemes of progressive perfectibility."

If the last phrase has a Burkeian ring, it is no accident. Burke was a lifelong favorite. Hazlitt remembered a quarter of a century afterwards (in the essay "On Reading Old Books") bringing home a copy of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) —it was 1798, he was nineteen—and reading it and rereading it for months on end, reading it aloud to others, with "particular pride and pleasure." Why with pride? His answer is splendid: "To understand an adversary is some praise: to admire him is more. I thought I did both: I knew I did one."

Burke was an admired adversary. Hazlitt thought his prose style "the most perfect" to be found in English, "the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which went the nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over"—a style "forked and playful as the lightning, crested like the serpent." His high regard for Burke raised doubts among his fellow democrats about how staunch he was in his allegiance to the people's cause. However, Hazlitt himself believed that

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> an abstract proposition was one thing—a masterly transition, a brilliant metaphor, another. I conceived too that he might be wrong in his main argument, and yet deliver fifty truths in arriving at a false conclusion.

Hazlitt, too, belongs among the great writers of English prose. Coleridge's comment on Hazlitt's conversation in 1803 (foreseeing the future writer, as Richard Holmes says, for Hazlitt was then trying to be a painter) was: "he sends well-headed & well-feathered Thoughts straight forwards to the mark with a Twang of the Bow-string"—Coleridge's sentence also flying straight to the mark with a twang on the word Twang, and an after-vibration on Bow-string.

Hazlitt knew the Wordsworthian bliss of living in the dawn of the new age that the French Revolution, trumpet-like, announced. For most of his life he was "*heart-whole* in that cause, and triumphed in the triumphs over the enemies of man!" When "the hag Legitimacy" was put back on her throne in Europe in 1815 and his hopes for the future were dashed, "he turned for consolation to the past." But his motive was not just consolatory; his mind was naturally inclined to looking backwards, in the spirit of the Romantic time. "The present is an age of talkers, and not of doers; and the reason is, the world is growing old. We are so advanced in the Arts and Sciences, that we live in retrospect, and dote on past achievements," he wrote in his sketch of "Mr. Coleridge" in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825). And even as an early democrat, one whose eyes were necessarily directed to the future, he looked back. In the preface to *Political Essays* he also wrote that it was a long since settled matter in Britain whether the kings were the servants of the people or the people of the kings. "In this country, in Old England, and under the succession of the House of Hanover," the people have been and are sovereign.

> An English subject cannot call this principle in question without renouncing his country; an English prince cannot call it in question without disclaiming his title to the crown.

The radical democrat, and also patriot of Old England, looked backwards. And his erstwhile friend, the reactionary quinquagenarian William Wordsworth (1770–1850), the great poet of backwards-turning memory—in what direction did he look? Forwards. Not in the way he had looked forward in his radical youth, of course. Social change frightened him. Behind Reform Bills he saw the mob pillaging and burning. Yet for all his elderly dread of imminent disasters, Wordsworth accepted change and even welcomed it. The truth of things was eternal, but time gave truth the forms in which it manifested itself, and time wore out the forms.

> Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
> The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
> That in the morning whitened hill and plain.

These lines are from the fine late sonnet "Mutability." In the not-so-fine late ode "To Enterprise," no longer repudiating that mainstay of decayed Augustan verse, personification, Wordsworth apostrophized Enterprise Miltonically as a goddess, the "Daughter of Hope! her favorite child,/ Whom she to young Ambition bore."[1]

An early Victorian, Wordsworth celebrated the modern triumphs of science and technology, archaeology and exploration in the poem. An early modern as well, he wished to narrow "the space of separation betwixt Prose and Metrical composition," in "a language really used by men," to relate and describe their real life. In his 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, from which I have just been quoting, he had looked for-

1 Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, as an example of "the madness pre-pense of pseudo-poesy" ready to personify no matter what abstraction, cited a dilly: "Inoculation, heavenly Maid! descend!" The Goddess Enterprise comes in not far behind the Maid Inoculation.

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ward to poetry's reaching out to embrace the new material circumstances of life that the Industrial Revolution was bringing about. Acting in this spirit years later in "To Enterprise," he doesn't neglect to speak, even if in stilted language, about harsh, unbeautiful modern things, things "at war with old poetic feeling," as he put it in another late poem, "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways." A charming instance in the ode of this determination to poeticize the unpoetical, fallen from the pen of a poet who hadn't the faintest idea of what is charming, is his description of steamships "slighting sails and scorning oars" to "keep faith with Time on distant shores," i.e. run on schedule.

Hazlitt looked back and Wordsworth looked forward. As a literary critic Hazlitt was especially backwards-looking. His extraordinary essay on *Coriolanus*, ignoring the protagonist's downfall, his tragedy, sees the play as an illustration, even celebration, of aristocratic insolence and excess, outrageous arrogance, heroic laying about with the sword, and bloody carnage—old nobility's bloody doing as against latter-day plebeian talking. Poetry, great poetry—which is to say the poetry of the early, not the later and more refined, ages—is anti-democratic:

> The cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject for poetry: it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind, "no jutting frieze, buttress, or coigne of advantage" for poetry "to make its pendant bed and procreant cradle in." The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty. . . . The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty. . . . The one is a monopolizing faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion. The one is aristocratical, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle.

Hazlitt upheld a kind of Vico-esque theory of the evolution of the arts, and indeed of civilization in general, of which his lecture on *Coriolanus* is but one expression. Unlike the sciences, where each generation is a stepping-stone for the next, so that there is a more or less steady advance of knowledge, the arts are not progressive. The supreme works of art were born out of societies barbarous or comparatively barbarous and reached their meridian height almost at once.

> Homer, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Dante, and Ariosto (Milton alone was of a late age, and not the worse for it), Raphael, Titian, Michael Angelo, Correggio, Cervantes, and Boccacchio—all lived near the beginnings of their arts—perfected, and all but created them. . . . Nature is the soul of art. There is a strength in the imagination that reposes entirely on nature, which nothing else can supply. There is in the old poets and painters a vigor . . . a confidence and firm faith, a sublime simplicity, which seems, not theirs, but given to them.

As society became more and more refined, artistic vigor declined. And not only artistic vigor; vitality in general declined. The distinguishing peculiarities of men and manners, Hazlitt said in his lecture "On Modern Comedy," were neutralized by knowledge and education, to produce a uniform, level, monotonous social landscape. "We learn to exist, not in ourselves, but in books;—all men become alike mere readers—spectators, not actors in the scene, and lose all proper personal identity." Shakespeare didn't breathe the modern world's acid air of logic and criticism: if he had there would have been no Shakespeare. The old poets, he writes, bending some lines from Burke, had "warm hearts of flesh and blood beating in their bosoms and were not embowelled of their natural entrails,

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and stuffed with paltry blurred sheets of paper."

This quotation from the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* belongs to a passage in which the eminent counter-revolutionist rejoiced in "the sullen resistance to change" of the English, in their "cold sluggishness of Character," which preserved them from suffering the fate of the French, who had been disembowelled and their natural entrails replaced with the pamphlets and proclamations of "sophisters, economists, and calculators," all that tribe of paper men. What Burke was writing about had little to do with what the pro-revolutionist Hazlitt is writing about, the arts in modern life. But Hazlitt discerned in Burke's anatomization of the revolutionary French something that struck him as true about the whole new world that had been born at the end of the eighteenth century. There had been a loss of nature and of natural feelings, of warmth of heart, and a growth of mind and thought, of "remote and ideal, sentimental and abstracted feelings"—now hearts were cold and heads hot.

Hazlitt's prose is downright, unhesitating, abrupt, but also flowing and luxuriant, as required; breathes the very man himself in the most open, unaffected way. How is it it betrays not the least embarrassment at the collision (as it seems) in himself between the advocate of French revolutions, and the adulator of their great enemy, between the passionate lover of the anti-levelling poetry of Shakespeare and all the mighty poets of the past, and the passionate democrat who despised kings and courts and the oppressions of legitimacy? The answer, I think, is freedom of the mind. The literary critic didn't apologize to the democrat, the democrat required no apology, not to speak of allegiance, from the critic. His liberal temperament was open to all possible considerations, without any dissipation of conviction.

The young Hazlitt was introduced to Wordsworth in the spring of 1798 by Coleridge. That siren voice had come to Shrewsbury earlier in the year to preach to a Unitarian congregation ten miles distant from the one Hazlitt's father was minister of; so he recalled, with emotion, in 1823, in "My First Acquaintance with the Poets." Coleridge arrived sounding as he came, "and did not cease while he staid; nor has he since, that I know of." He fluttered the Shropshire Unitarians with his eloquence like an eagle in a dovecote; Hazlitt, calling on the *Coriolanus* quotation again, wrote: "and the Welsh mountains that skirt the horizon with their tempestuous confusion, agree to have heard no such mystic sounds since the days of 'High-born Hoel's harp or soft Llewellyn's lay!'" And Coleridge fluttered Hazlitt as well—roused and animated him so much that years afterwards he said he owed to this meeting with Coleridge, who had treated him with kindness, the awakening of his mind and its eventually finding its voice. In a recollection of a time of friendship, there was less place for what became his usual savage, unjust, obsessive, yet penetrating criticism of the poet-philosopher—usual after Coleridge's (and Wordsworth's and Southey's) apostasy from the cause of democracy.

On Coleridge's invitation the dazzled youth visited Somerset; immediately he was taken to Alfoxden to visit Wordsworth. The poet wasn't home, but Dorothy Wordsworth made them welcome and Hazlitt was allowed to leaf through the as-yet-unpublished *Lyrical Ballads*. Though a young, still uncritical reader, he sensed in them "a new style and a new spirit of poetry." Years later he showed an understanding of the new style better than any. Reviewing *The Excursion* in 1814, he described Wordsworth's "imagination as holding immediately from nature, and 'owing no allegiance' but 'to the elements,'" and yet his poetry "is not so much a description of natural objects, as of the feelings associated with them . . . his thoughts are his real subjects." Wordsworth's was a poetry of the mind; nothing "tells for itself" but only as the poet's mind responds to it; he shows a systematic unwillingness to

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"share the palm with his subject." He was essentially a solitary—man alone: "His mind preys upon itself. It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe." Rejecting all the pomp and external show, the gorgeous palaces and solemn temples, of the old poetry, Wordsworth discovers in little, mean subjects and the humblest figures "sentiments subtle and profound," which he expresses in the plainest style. What Wordsworth criticism in the second half of the past century saw with some surprise, we can already see in Hazlitt's description of Wordsworth's verse: how it laid the foundations for much of modern poetry.

In spite of Hazlitt's later enmity towards Wordsworth (for which he had some grounds), he admired his poetry and said so freely, frequently. An inveterate and prodigal quoter, he quoted Wordsworth often. He would not allow personal antipathy to interfere with literary judgment. Or literary judgment to interfere with personal antipathy—which produced a mixture that Henry Crabb Robinson found baffling, Charles Lamb amusing, and Keats exhilarating. Robinson noted in his diary that the portraits sketched in *The Spirit of the Age* consisted of "violent praise and very ill-natured sneers strangely jumbled together." Lamb said Hazlitt's essays on Coleridge were "like saluting a man: 'Sir, you are the greatest man I ever saw,' and then pulling him by the nose." Keats said, "Hazlitt is your only damner, and if ever I am damned—damn me, if I shouldn't like him to damn me." The clever, malevolent Hazlitt knew how, it seems, to damn with loud praise.

As good a damner as he was, if a count were made, I feel sure his encomia of Wordsworth's verse would outnumber the opprobria. Hazlitt praised and damned roundly, without mincing matters. When his judgment was mixed, as with Wordsworth, that mixture, bluntly declared with no neat balance drawn as between merits and demerits which the reader could pocket and carry away with him, seemed puzzling. When Hazlitt wrote in his *Excursion* review that Wordsworth's "mind magnifies the littleness of his subject, and raises its meanness, lends it his strength, and clothes it with grandeur," you feel an understandable uncertainty. What he is saying is clear enough: he admires the poet's genius, but deplores the principle (the democratic principle) of his poetry. But what he concludes from this, what his final judgment of Wordsworth's poetry is, he doesn't say. For one who loved best the elder poets, he showed remarkable sensitivity, remarkable openness to the distinctive qualities of Wordsworth's verse, showed that "depth of Taste" which Keats said was one of the "three things to rejoice at in this Age" (the other two being *The Excursion* and Benjamin Robert Haydon's paintings). At the end of the review, however, there is nothing puzzling about the rancor that bursts out of him: although Wordsworth "describe[s] the love of nature better than any other poet," he, Hazlitt, can't accord Wordsworth's country neighbors the same admiration. "All country people hate each other," he declares, and goes on to inveigh against the envy, malice, ignorance, moral indifference, backbiting of rural life; the bad tea, bad cooking, uncivilized comfortlessness and self-denial; the rapacity, the intrusive curiosity. If the people of the Lake District are less gross than rustic people elsewhere, they are more selfish, hard as the rocks they cultivate, their eye always on the main chance.

The sudden explosion is startling in its vehemence, striking as a catalogue of rural meannesses and insensibility. Hazlitt wasn't suggesting that Wordsworth sentimentalized rustic life; in fact he claimed that his view was "confirmed by Mr. Wordsworth's own account" (account!). In attacking the Lake country people, he was attacking Wordsworth. The personal essayist's outburst was very personal. Yet Hazlitt's outburst has its point. It breaks down, I find, the almost fairytale-like isolation of Wordsworthian rusticity, with its uncanny atmosphere. He reminds one of the ordinary, quotidian countryside—and in so doing

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only reminds one the more of the transfiguring power of Wordsworth's feeling for its landscape and people.

The kind of poetry that Hazlitt's review describes is the subjective, reflective modern kind. As moved as he was by the "beauty . . . perfect originality and pathos" of Wordsworth's poems, Hazlitt deplored the direction in which they were going. In his lecture of 1818 on Shakespeare and Milton, he is more explicit, more antagonistic about this.

> The great fault of the modern school of poetry is, that it is an experiment to reduce poetry to a mere effusion of natural sensibility: or what is worse, to divest it both of imaginary splendor and human passion, to surround the meanest objects with the morbid feelings and devouring egotism of the writers' own minds. Milton and Shakespeare did not so understand poetry. They gave a more liberal interpretation both to nature and art. They did not do all they could to get rid of the one and the other, to fill up the dreary void with Moods of their own Minds.

Wordsworth "got rid" of art by turning his back on the past and meeting the universe with a naked sensibility and a naked style. The poet of nature "got rid" of nature by substituting for it his feelings for it, the Moods of his own Mind. There is an echo in the essayist's words of the first essayist of all, his admired Montaigne, who had written: "Fie on the eloquence that leaves us craving itself, not things!" The imaginations of Shakespeare and Milton engaged with the world and did justice to its things, to "what was grand in the objects of nature, or affecting in the events of human life." Hazlitt did not think, he wrote in his essay "Mr. Wordsworth," that "our author has any very cordial sympathy with Shakespear. How should he? Shakespear was least of an egotist of any body in the world." He was right. Wordsworth thought Shakespeare had been compelled as a dramatist to descend from the lofty regions of thought whose pure air his soul would have preferred to breathe, into the thick atmosphere of playhouses which required scenes of gross and visible action from him.

Did Wordsworth think Shakespeare would have preferred being Wordsworth? Well, almost! But every great poet reads his predecessors according to the demands of his own genius. And Wordsworth's genius demanded a poetry of the mind meditating pathetic and sublime thoughts. But Hazlitt, along with many others, was wrong in thinking Wordsworth egotistical. Even if the man was, the poetry wasn't: it was subjective, which is something else. The man never neglected his self-interest, and his bardic self-importance caused his friends to grimace and groan behind his back, but an egotist? I don't think so; he was not a selfish man. The Coleridge embittered by their rupture is no fit witness.

Lecturing "On the Living Poets" in the same year, in another outburst—a Burkeian outburst—Hazlitt denounced the Lake School, with Wordsworth at its head, for carrying out a French Revolution in poetry. The revolutionary democrat castigated Wordsworth for being a revolutionary poet. His poetry went "hand in hand with politics":

> Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the commonplace figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered a piece of antique foppery, . . . kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere. . . . Authority and fashion, elegance or arrangement, were hooted out of countenance as pedantry and prejudice. Every one did that which was good in his own eyes. The object was to reduce all things to an absolute level . . . all distinctions of nature and society . . . [to tolerate] neither tradition, reverence, nor ceremony.

On and on he goes, in what is almost a rant, against Wordsworth's "upstart self-

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sufficiency," contempt for the past, intolerant Rousseauian egotism. When he sketches the poet's portrait in *The Spirit of the Age*, he says much the same thing though with less asperity, and flatly pronounces: "His Muse is a levelling one."

Indeed she was. Democratically, Jacobinically, she elected as her subject humble, mainly rustic life. She jettisoned all the poetic bag and baggage not only of the hackneyed classical verse, but also of all traditional poetry, defying educated taste and expectations.

In 1801 Wordsworth sent the great Whig politician Charles James Fox, known as "the darling of the people," a copy of the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Fox's was still the great voice of liberty for Wordsworth, even though that voice was now urging peace with the detested Buonaparte. In his accompanying letter, he called Fox's attention especially to the poems "The Brothers" and "Michael" as showing that "men who do not wear fine clothes can feel deeply." Fox replied affably, giving his suffrage however to other poems in the volume. And he demurred about "Michael": he was, he wrote, "no great friend to blank verse" when employed on subjects "treated with simplicity." Blank verse, for Fox, was too noble for humble uses. A great Whig lord, highly cultivated, he had a lord's taste in literature whatever his political views. Some years later, in 1806, now a celebrated poet and a Tory, Wordsworth was introduced to Fox at one of the "routs" of the great. Long afterwards he remembered that Fox had risen from a card table saying, "I am glad to see Mr. Wordsworth, though we differ as much in our views of politics as we do in our views of poetry." Wordsworth's prompt reply was: "But in poetry you must admit that I am the Whig and you are the Tory." It is a nice story. A few months later Fox lay dying. When Wordsworth read about it in the newspaper, he memorialized the statesman in a poem as one of the "great and good."

Wordsworth had ceased to be a radical, a democrat, in politics; never would he cease to be one in poetry, never really. Like the French revolutionists who believed themselves to have ushered in a new Year One of the world in 1789, Wordsworth believed that his poetry marked a new beginning in English verse. In 1815, when his revolutionary youth was retreating so far from him as almost to seem another's, he still saw himself as the poetic revolutionary of 1798. On a visit to London, while paying a call on Charles and Mary Lamb, he picked up a new book by William Godwin lying on a table and read in it that "all modern poetry is nothing but the old genuine poetry, new vamped, and delivered to us at second, or twentieth hand." "In great wrath," Lamb reported to a correspondent, "the poet snatched up a pencil and wrote in the margin: 'That is false, William Godwin. Signed William Wordsworth.'"

Nevertheless, changes took place in Wordsworth's poetry. The absolute ban on personification and classical allusion was relaxed. "Yew Trees"—composed in 1803 in wonderful blank verse winding, sometimes twisting, powerfully through thirty-three run-on lines in a sustained breath—sees the shadowy grove of four great yews as a "natural temple"; into its Tartarean gloom, in the midst of natural Wordsworthian Nature, an allegorical group out of the classical Nature of the old literature suddenly meets at midday in the trees' dense shade: Silence, Foresight, Death, and Time the Shadow. Unexpectedly, Wordsworth has turned to a classical source, borrowing help from the Virgilian underworld to conjure up the natural sacredness of Borrowdale's ancient yews, the awe of the nether powers they inspire. The particular passage he drew on from book six of the *Aeneid* is crammed with allegorical personifications, two of which he took into his own poem.

Another change was in his attitude to liberty. Liberty, Wordsworth believed, and would always believe, was the foundation of British virtue, British greatness, and his own Englishness. Freedom was the very principle of nature, a freedom he often des-

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cribed as "wild"; the adjective was honorific in his vocabulary. But already in 1802, in his sonnet on the sonnet, he was finding the close confines of its fourteen lines a relief to one who had begun to feel "the weight of too much liberty." By luck and determination Wordsworth had managed till his early thirties to do as he pleased, and what he pleased was to be an "idle poet." Then in 1802 he became engaged. This had a chastening effect on his careless attitude to the bread-and-cheese responsibilities of life. He was obliged to take thought.

> My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
> As if life's business were a summer mood;
> As if all needful things would come unsought
> To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
> But how can He expect that others should
> Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
> Love him, who for himself will take no
> heed at all.

And thinking of "Cold, pain, and labour, and all the fleshly ills,/ And mighty Poets in their misery dead," he grew afraid.

I have not read anywhere that Wordsworth ever vacillated in his engagement. Nevertheless, in this same spring of 1802 his mind turned back, as if rebelliously, in his "Stanzas Written in a Pocket-copy of Thomson's Castle of Indolence," to revel still in his freedom from "the dreary intercourse," as he called it in "Tintern Abbey," "of daily life." Among the idle dwellers in the castle (which included Coleridge) there was none who took a "more devout enjoyment" with them in their idleness than the unnamed One who is Wordsworth: "here on his hours he hung as on a book,/ On his own time here would he float away/ As doth a fly upon a summer brook."

From time to time he would withdraw from the castle to roam about in storm and sunshine, on mountain top and plain, which led some to think "he was a lover, and did woo." The *man* Wordsworth indeed was a lover then, wooing Mary Hutchinson. But the poet Wordsworth repudiates that thought, for "verse was what he had been wedded to;/ And his own mind did like a tempest strong/ Come to him thus, and drove the weary Wight along."

Wordsworth was married in due course in the fall. It was the end of his old life of solitude in poetry and nature. The duties of a husband and father would now weigh on him. At the end of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth calls his poem the story of "the discipline/ And consummation of the Poet's life." The preceding paragraph tells us what the discipline and consummation consisted in: in the more regular "interposition," into the sublime musings of the poet on his solitary inhuman heights of vision, of "thoughts/ Of man and his concerns, such as become/ A human creature"; with the result that

> the deep enthusiastic joy,
> The rapture of the hallelujah sent
> From all that breathes and is, was chastened,
> stemmed
> And balanced by a reason which indeed
> Is reason, duty and pathetic truth.

The common duties of life, as well as its sad truths, chasten the poet's rapture. Yet they were a necessary, a humanizing discipline, he felt, though always well aware how they threatened to "consume the diviner spirit." And in 1804 he even dedicates an ode to duty, an outright classical ode to Duty personified. Humanized Wordsworth was less indifferent to the human past.

"Duty" is a word shaped uneasily by modern lips. Except on official occasions it is little used. It has a long history of misuse. Used well or ill, it has an element of coercion in it, must always have. Already the young Wordsworth didn't use it. He used words like "impulse":

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can.

He came back to this subject often, perhaps most strikingly in the sublime Lucy lyric,

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"Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower." There he sang the power of nature to reconcile what desire and appetite prompt us to do, with what the law forbids us to do —all-embracing nature making the lion of law lie down with the tiger of impulse. In this way traditional duty, a demanding taskmaster, was replaced by an amiable mentor who now spurs one on, now puts out a mild deterrent hand ("kindle[s] or restrain[s]"). The paradisal dawn of an age of revolution shines in this. But the breaking day proved less than paradisal; as the ode says,

> I, loving freedom, and untried;
> No sport of every random gust,
> Yet being to myself a guide,
> Too blindly have reposed my trust—

and he supplicates for the sterner control of the "Daughter of the Voice of God," Duty, who is both "a light to guide" and "a rod to check the erring and reprove."

However, freedom was for Wordsworth something absolutely fundamental—never would he give it up and submit to an external control of any kind, God's or anybody else's. Nor would the Tory that he later became give it up. So recoiling from his own words in a stanza immediately following one in which he has just exclaimed, "Me this unchartered freedom tires;/ I feel the weight of chance desires," he says:

> Yet not the less would I throughout
> Still act according to the voice
> Of my own wish; and feel past doubt
> That my submissiveness was choice:
> Denial and restraint I prize
> No farther than they breed a second Will
> more wise.

Then vacillating yet again in the face of the apparent self-contradiction, he struck the stanza out. Was he having trouble making up his mind? No. He was having trouble (understandably) in finding the right words to express a submissiveness which was not submission, the need for support in one who found in himself all the support he needed. At the end of the poem, Duty, though twice called stern, wears a "benignant," smiling face.

The "Ode to Duty" is an un-Wordsworthian poem in its classical style: in its high address, elevated tone, generality of expression, and eloquence of a finished rhetorician. The lovely last lines of the penultimate stanza, about Duty "preserving the stars from wrong," is a classical notion which, from Wordsworth's pen, is more fanciful than serious; the substance of the ode is less classical that it might seem. All in all, it is poetry of a very high order. At the same time it anticipated his decline, the exhaustion that the efforts of his unassisted consciousness, his poetry of the mind intent on its own movements, its fluxes and refluxes, had caused him—the decline intimated stylistically by his falling back on the classical tradition. And intimated spiritually by his saying, with such shocking dispassion: "My hopes no more must change their name,/ I long for a repose that ever is the same."

Hazlitt called him "the most original poet now living." Exhausted by his own originality, Wordsworth made his peace with tradition. "I abstained in my earlier writings from all introduction of pagan fable," he said; "—surely it may ally itself with real sentiment." But young Wordsworth had gone directly to nature for just that reason, that the gods and goddesses of pagan fables had become a mere puppetry, their possibilities of expressing real sentiment quite gone. He had put aside "all the traditions of learning," Hazlitt wrote, to "begin *de novo* on a *tabula rasa* of poetry. The purple pall, the nodding plume of tragedy are exploded as mere pantomime and trick, to return to the simplicity of truth and nature. Kings, queens, priests, nobles, the altar and throne . . . are not to be found" in his work. "The author tramples on the pride of art with greater pride." Grasmere's poet had recognized only the natural sovereignties:

> What was the great Parnassus' self to Thee,
> Mount Skiddaw? In his natural sovereignty

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> Our British Hill is nobler by far; he shrouds
> His double front among the Atlantic clouds,
> And pours forth streams more sweet than
> Castaly.

But now Wordsworth allowed that Parnassus, too, gave a scope of vision, as well as Skiddaw. He began to turn to books for subjects, he who had written, "Up! up! my friend and quit your books. . . . Let nature be your teacher"—lines prompted by the young Hazlitt's pouring his philosophical ideas into the poet's unphilosophical ear.

"Till old experience," the young Milton had written, "do attain/ To something like Prophetic strain." Wordsworth attained to the prophetic strain in his great sonnets castigating British commercialism and exalting British liberty. But age with him arrested experience; he was seized by apathy: prophecy dwindled, turning into querulousness, fearfulness, and jeremiads, which wore out even his wife's patience. Hazlitt didn't fail to see the change. In the heated political atmosphere and unrest at the end of the Napoleonic wars, he attacked the Lake poets by attributing their "flagging poetical powers" to the surrender of their "principles"—a charge which, in Wordsworth's case, echoed down the nineteenth century. But Hazlitt was too good a critic to persist in such politically motivated simple-mindedness. A decade later in *The Spirit of the Age*, his attention fixed on Wordsworth's classicizing poems, he doesn't deplore, he lauds the change in the poet.

> His later philosophic productions . . . are a departure from, a dereliction of, his first principles. They are classical and courtly. They are polished in style without being gaudy, dignified in subject without affectation. . . . [An example] of what we mean [is] the exquisite poem, entitled *Laodamia*. [It] breathes the pure spirit of the finest fragments of antiquity—the sweetness, the gravity, the strength, the beauty and the languor of death—"Calm contemplation and majestic pains." Its glossy brilliancy arises from the perfection of the finishing, like that of a careful sculpture, not from gaudy coloring. The texture of the thoughts has the smoothness and solidity of marble. It is a poem that might be read aloud in Elysium, and the spirits of departed heroes and sages would gather round to listen to it!

The one who had decried the banishment of imaginary splendor and human passion, classical story and classical allusion, tropes and rhetoric from Wordsworth's poetry, now found these features of the old literature making an unexpected appearance in "Laodamia" and other poems. (In fact, there are not many others.) No longer does Wordsworth dismiss poetry's past with "upstart self-sufficiency"; he has come around. His coming around is part of his falling off, to be sure. But to see that it needed the perspective of time. Wordsworth is a great poet again in "Laodamia," not by way of a momentary recovery of his old greatness, but, most remarkably, in the old way of poetry, the way he had overthrown.

Matthew Arnold later also praised "Laodamia." Although Wordsworth's poetry, he wrote, had no style, because poetic style "heightens" whereas Wordsworth's "manner," close to prose, levels, "Laodamia" was different. "It is style . . . and the elevation given by style, which chiefly makes the effectiveness" of that poem. However, becoming uneasy three paragraphs later, he takes back his praise: "[B]ut if I am to tell the very truth, I find "Laodamia" not wholly free from something artificial." Style, which is the high color, the high pitch of verse (its pride of art, Hazlitt would say), *must* have something artificial about it when low-pitched Wordsworth tries for it.

By saying Wordsworth's poetry had no style, Arnold meant what Hazlitt long before had stated clearly in historical terms: that it hadn't the glory of the poetry of the past, that he missed in it the proud full sail of English verse. Hazlitt's larger appreciation of Wordsworth allows him elevation, but it is the elevation of an unassuming modern muse looking down from the heights of reflection to the earth which is

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her footstool and her home. He put the matter most succinctly when he said that Wordsworth trampled on the pride of art with greater pride. The greater pride of Wordsworth's muse was to spurn the traditional pride of art of poetry: its tragic splendor, social breadth, crowded dramatis personae, high rhetorical eloquence, reverence, ceremony. And the poets of today, living in an age of prose that gives no sign of ever ending, all Wordsworthians whether they like it or not, all practitioners of the plain style, for what else can a modern poet write in?—they too, it seems, must trample on the pride of art of English poetry.

"Laodamia" has, most unusually in Wordsworth, dramatic quality. Its story comes from Virgil, and farther back from Euripides and Homer. The poem plunges into it at once as Laodamia begs the gods in the first stanza to give her back her husband Protesilaus, the first Greek brave enough to leap ashore at Troy and therefore die, for so it was decreed.

> "With sacrifice before the rising morn
> Vows have I made by fruitless hope inspired;
> And from the infernal Gods, 'mid shades forlorn
> Of night, my slaughtered Lord have I required:
> Celestial pity I again implore;—
> Restore him to my sight—great Jove, restore!"

With its end-stopped lines and strongly marked caesuras, the verse is measured, balanced, the open vowels resonate solemnly, and the couplet brings the stanza to a high declamatory close. More than half the poem consists of speeches recited à haute voix by the two protagonists. The declamatory style, behind which lies Wordsworth's reading in the Greek tragedians, is right—it is a kind of theater we are in.

> So speaking, and by fervent love endowed
> With faith, the Suppliant heavenward lifts her hands;
> While, like the sun emerging from a cloud,
> Her countenance brightens—and her eye expands;
> Her bosom heaves and spreads, her stature grows;
> And she expects the issue in repose.

Laodamia gestures with neoclassical formality; her expanding figure fills the stage in a way that calls to mind (I will venture to say) Racine. She has, what Hazlitt says the poem as a whole has, a marmoreal quality. But her marble breathes, her bosom heaves. The poem, again unusually, is warm with openly declared sexual feeling as "the impassioned Queen" springs, and springs again, to embrace the shade of her dead lord, allowed three hours with her in the upper air: "But unsubstantial Form eludes her grasp/ As often as that eager grasp was made."

The absence of passion in Wordsworth's verse was always conspicuous. All about love as his poetry is, it is hardly ever about sexual love. He once said, phlegmatically or truculently, "I don't write love poems." Hazlitt said that you would suppose from reading him that on this earth there was neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Shelley mocked Wordsworth ("Peter") less elegantly in his parody of *Peter Bell*:

> But from the first 'twas Peter's drift
> To be a kind of moral eunuch,
> He touched the hem of Nature's shift,
> Felt faint—and never dared uplift
> The closest, all-concealing tunic.

"Laodamia" goes some way to refute the charge of timid prudery (which in any case is a mistaken characterization of Wordsworth's sexual silence): the queen, forgiving Protesilaus his sacrificial deed, which cost her all her happiness, will not believe that the figure glowing with life before her has not escaped "the malice of the grave."

> "Redundant are thy locks, thy lips as fair
> As when their breath enriched Thessalian air.
> No Spectre greets me,—no vain Shadow this;

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Come, blooming Hero, place thee by my side!
Give, on this well-known couch, one nuptial kiss
To me, this day, a second time thy bride!

There are many indications that Wordsworth was a passionate man. He was also a private, reticent man. As a writer of first-person poetry, he could not express sexual feeling openly without doing violence to his own nature. But behind the shield of ancient fable, he could, if moved to it. In 1810, alone in London on a visit, he experienced an access of passionate tenderness for his wife Mary which he poured out in letters to her. She wrote back that she was powerfully "affected" and "agitated"; it was "so new a thing to see the breathing of thy inmost heart upon paper."

If this or some such experience lay behind "Laodamia," it was interpreted to conform to middle-aged Wordsworth's religion of renunciation. For love doesn't triumph in the poem. In the *Aeneid*, Laodamia like Dido is the victim of unhappy love, death having taken away her lover, as destiny took away the other's, and left her inconsolable. But for Wordsworth she is no victim but an offender against the laws of moderation and self-restraint: Jove "frown[s] in heaven" at her outburst and Protesilaus turns a Stygian gray. In a splendid language of Roman self-subjection, he exhorts her to control "Rebellious passion: for the Gods approve/ The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul;/ A fervent, not ungovernable, love." Let her mourn him meekly when he departs—Why must he depart? Didn't Hercules wrest Alcestis, Medea Aeson, from the grave, she asks, invoking the resistless power of love, more potent than Hercules' nerve and sinew, Medea's magic. But if he goes, she will surely follow—"Peace!," he cries. His Elysian beauty returning, she is calmed, and he goes on to speak

. . . of love, such love as Spirits feel
In worlds whose course is equable and pure;
No fears to beat away—no strife to heal—
The past unsighed for, and the future sure . . .
Of all that is most beauteous—imaged there
In happier beauty; more pellucid streams,
An ampler ether, a diviner air,
And fields invested with purpureal gleams.
Climes which the sun, who sheds the brightest day
Earth knows, is all unworthy to survey.

In one of Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, between the great classical scholar Richard Porson and Southey, Porson is made to say about these lines that they "might have been heard with shouts of rapture in the regions [they] describe," that the whole poem "is such as Sophocles might have exulted to own." Hazlitt saw the classicality of the poem in sculptural terms, as breathing the spirit of the finest antique statuary. The line he quoted (misquoted a little) in illustration, was Protesilaus' lovely one about Erebus, an Erebus disdainful of the unenduring joys of sense of Earth: "Calm pleasures there abide—majestic pains." The balance and steadiness of the line express an ideal classical repose which "happy ghosts" enjoy eternally.

But Wordsworthian repose, when you look back to the "Ode to Duty," is "a repose that ever is the same"—an unmoving, deathly repose. A kind of deathliness began to haunt Wordsworth early in his life, and it insists on being heard in "Laodamia," after the more pellucid streams, ampler ether, and diviner air of Elysium. As the poem approaches its climax, Protesilaus once again exhorts Laodamia—lectures her rather, for now he goes beyond splendid Roman *sententiae* to rebuke her for being "weak in reason," "in self-government too slow"; he admonishes her to elevate her "affections," to seek "a higher object" than mortal love, so that "self might be annulled." He upbraids, he scolds, he preaches "annulment." The high declamatory style is soured by stridency as Wordsworth moralizes classical moderation into religiose renunciation. What Laodamia wants, wants back, is life and its relinquished raptures. Nothing the hero says touches her. When Hermes re-

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appears, she shrieks and falls dead on the palace floor.

With the end of the contest (*agon*) between the king and queen, the poem falls off from its classical style. The penultimate stanza turned into a thirty-years' comedy of indecision as Wordsworth, not doubting that sentence must be passed on Laodamia, first judged her mildly (1814 ed.); then nerving himself against "weak pity," harshly; then, uneasy, less harshly; and still uneasy, even less harshly (1845). The *de jure* verdict handed down in the next-to-the-last stanza is nothing as decisive as it seemed to him. For all the while Wordsworth was fussing over it, the conclusion of the poem had been achieved, without hesitation, by a verdict *de gratia* in the last stanza:

> —Yet tears to human suffering are due;
> And mortal hopes defeated and o'erthrown
> Are mourned by man, and not by man alone,
> As fondly he believes.—Upon the side
> Of Hellespont (such faith was entertained)
> A knot of spiry trees for ages grew
> From out the tomb of him for whom she died;
> And ever, when such stature they had gained
> That Ilium's walls were subject to their view,
> The trees' tall summits withered at the sight;
> A constant interchange of growth and blight!

Turning away from his moral theme —turning against it, indeed—the poet speaks with a softened voice. Now human suffering is given its due of tears, mourning is allowed defeated mortal hopes. What is human, what is mortal is no longer a matter for accusation. In the changed air of the last stanza, you wish to remember only the Protesilaus who regretted the loss of his new-wedded wife, the cities he had planned, his unfinished towers. How simply after all—in the phrase about "the tomb of him for whom she died"—is her reprobated determination to follow him in death, when carried out, accepted. The blight that strikes the cypresses at the sight of Troy honors Protesilaus' heroic death—all his life Wordsworth admired the martial virtues. And even more it honors the death of her "who so deeply loved." The poem ends as quite forgiving, or certainly looking past, the immoderation of love it condemns earlier. Death blights love, for mortality blights everything; yet the trees grow tall again, until blighted again, over and over. It is, the poem says, almost jubilantly, "A constant interchange of growth and blight!"

What Hazlitt called the classical finish of "Laodamia," its marble-like smoothness and solidity, violates everything you think Wordsworthian. Yet there is nothing of the virtuoso performance about it; it hasn't a trace of artificiality. Artificial, that means "false," and Wordsworth was *never* false. He didn't know how it was done. The stuff of the poem is the stuff of his own spirit, aroused again to contention with itself. Though he found the story in a book, it is no bookish thing he wrote. It is a last effort to write poetry in the old style, by the subverter of the old style. Poets after him who essay to write so, write pastiches, even if sometimes brilliant ones.

Wordsworth did not "much esteem" "Laodamia," Henry Crabb Robinson noted in his diary, because it belonged to the "inferior class of Poems Founded on the Affections" (one of the poet's fussy classifications of his collected poetry). He esteemed most his "Poems of the Imagination," pointing, for examples, to "Yew Trees" and "A Nightpiece."[2] These are fine poems, to be sure, the first better than fine, but they have no story, no splendor of language, no human passion, no human drama. They have none of what Hazlitt called the pride of art of poetry. What a loss it was, but, as it proved, impossible to avoid, when poetry shrank so. Consciousness of the loss, which dawned early in the eighteenth century, isn't on our minds the way it used to be. It is there nevertheless, and always will be, as long as the great poets of the past are read. It will always be regretted, the proud full sail of English verse.

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2 Later on he reclassified "Laodamia" into the "Poems of the Imagination."

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W. Somerset Maugham: the pleasures of a master

by Anthony Daniels

A few months ago I went to dinner with an old friend, a retired professor of great distinction who suffered throughout his career from the vituperation of his academic colleagues who took a view of their chosen subject almost diametrically opposed to his own. Now that he has been proved right, and they have been proved wrong, they denigrate his work as having been nothing more than a statement of the obvious. It isn't only totalitarian dictators, it seems, who rewrite history.

My friend was reading when I arrived, but made guilty haste to put away the book as I entered the room. He could scarcely have been more embarrassed had he been caught perusing an album of pornographic postcards. Under the promise of total secrecy, he confessed that he had been reading the short stories of W. Somerset Maugham. In fact, I had already guessed as much: an habitué of secondhand bookshops, I can now judge a book by its cover pretty well and I recognized the volume from afar.

Secrecy was of course essential because admitting to an admiration for Maugham is to an intellectual what voyaging overseas once was to an orthodox Brahmin: it leads automatically to a loss of caste. If his academic enemies ever discovered that he had been reading the Master, let alone with enjoyment and appreciation, they would have additional reason to discount his life's work.

I have met this extreme disdain for Maugham many times. For example, a second cousin of mine: during the Fifties and early Sixties she lived on the fringes of literary Paris, and was briefly the mistress of Richard Wright. She believed that Wright had been poisoned by the CIA, because he died suddenly after having been treated in the American Hospital in Paris for long undiagnosed amoebic dysentery. She was not at all pleased when I told her that the drug used for the treatment of amoebic dysentery in those days, emetine hydrochloride, was notoriously cardiotoxic. She wanted her former lover to have been murdered for political reasons.

I once mentioned to her en passant that I rather admired Maugham and would be happy if I wrote as well as he. I might as well have expressed a preference for Offenbach to Bach. I had said something that was, quite simply, inadmissible in polite company. I hadn't claimed that Maugham was the greatest writer of the twentieth century, or that he was the superior of Thomas Mann, or anything remotely like that. I had merely said that I thought he was good: and that was bad. It led to a curling of the lip, and the implication that I was neither very bright nor possessed of sound judgment. The subject, being closed, was changed.

I don't really understand why Maugham should be so vehemently despised. It is true of course that his plays now seem so stilted that they can hardly be staged, and that many of his novels are poor stuff. But as he

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himself remarked, only a mediocre writer is always at his best. And his best writing—the short stories, a few of the novels, his philosophical memoir, *The Summing Up*, which defies easy classification—will continue to find readers for at least a century or two. That is, after all, more than can be said for 999 out of 1000 people who take to the pen.

Even if he were a despicably bad writer, why should he evoke such contumely? No other writer known to me does so in quite the same fashion. A bad writer is best forgotten rather than hated or despised. If I had said to my cousin that I admired, say, E. Phillips Oppenheim, an infinitely less estimable writer than Maugham, her reaction would have been far weaker and probably non-existent. It is not even as if Maugham's work had a baleful practical effect upon the world: as if, for example, Pol Pot or Idi Amin had been directly inspired by it or by the ideas it contained.

I do not find Maugham to have been so very negligible. Perhaps this is because something he wrote had a lasting effect on me: for certain words in *The Summing Up* burned themselves so deeply into my mind that they are with me always as I write: "I have never had much patience," said Maugham,

> with the writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning. You have only to go to the great philosophers to see that it is possible to express with lucidity the most subtle reflections. . . . There are two sorts of obscurity you find in writers. One is due to negligence and the other to wilfulness. People often write obscurely because they have never taken the trouble to write clearly. . . . Another cause of obscurity is that the writer is himself not quite sure of his meaning. He has a vague impression of what he wants to say, but has not, either from a lack of mental power or from laziness, exactly formulated it in his mind and it is natural enough that he should not find a precise expression for a confused idea. . . . Some writers who do not think clearly are inclined to suppose that their thoughts have a significance greater than at first sight appears. . . . It is very easy to persuade oneself that a phrase that one does not quite understand may mean a great deal more than one realizes.

No doubt this insistence on clarity accounts in part for the flatness of his prose that becomes apparent if one reads too much of it at a time. Yet clarity is not intrinsically incompatible with the highest flights of poetry, and remains an intellectual virtue (the philosopher Karl Popper thought it a moral duty). But the demand for clarity makes intellectuals uneasy, for it renders originality so much more difficult to achieve. Clarity thus comes to be identified with superficiality and obscurity with profundity.

Superficiality is, of course, one of the chief charges laid against Maugham, the others being cynicism, misanthropy, and snobbery. I think people have tended to confuse his character in real life—or what was reportedly his character in real life—with what he actually wrote. If he was a sour, prune-faced man who was unreasonably outraged by the smallest breach of etiquette, and who was excessively worldly into the bargain, it must infallibly follow that his writing partook of the same or cognate qualities. But this is staggeringly wide of the mark.

I realized just how wide when I worked as a doctor in the Gilbert Islands. There I re-read his South Sea stories with the added interest of being present on the set, as it were. I was extremely proud of having deduced, on internal evidence alone, that one his most famous stories, "Rain," had an important connexion with the very islands on which I worked. By the slight geographical information that Maugham gave, I deduced that Davidson, the medical missionary and one of the principal characters in the story, must have worked in the Gilbert Islands. But my brilliant literary deduction was quite unnecessary and superfluous, as I shall later relate.

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The story, which takes place in 1916, concerns a group of passengers en route from Honolulu to Apia. An epidemic of measles breaks out and they are forced to stay for a couple of weeks in Pago Pago in American Samoa. The principal characters are Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, Dr. and Mrs. McPhail, and Sadie Thompson.

Davidson is a stern New England evangelical puritan with an unbending sense of duty and an unyielding horror of what he believes to be sin. His wife is of like mind. Dr. McPhail is a Scottish doctor travelling to the South Seas to recover from war wounds. Together with his wife, he acts as a kind of Greek chorus. The McPhails are weak but tolerant people, of no fixed convictions. Sadie Thompson is a prostitute fleeing from the law in Honolulu. She is brash, vulgar, and entirely sensual.

These disparate characters are forced together in a boarding house in Pago Pago, where Sadie Thompson immediately sets up shop, with loud music, parties, and gentlemen visitors. Davidson believes it is his duty not only to suppress vice wherever it may manifest itself but also to save Sadie Thompson's soul. An epic struggle between them ensues. Davidson enlists the aid of the governor of the island, who knows that the missionaries are well-connected in Washington. Just as it appears that Davidson has won, he is found on the beach with his throat cut. Sadie Thompson has seduced him and he has killed himself.

I deduced that Davidson was a missionary in the Gilbert Islands from the information given in the story: the Davidsons' islands were of low coral, widely separated, ten days' journey north of Samoa. The Gilberts were the only islands that fitted this description, but my excitement at so momentous a deduction was hardly justified: for in *A Writer's Notebook* (published in the year of my birth) which consists of Maugham's edited jottings from 1892 to 1949, it was openly stated that the missionary upon whom Maugham based Davidson worked in the Gilberts.

It is well known, of course, that Maugham used real characters in his stories whom he did so little to disguise that the rubber-planters of Malaya threatened violence if he ever returned to the peninsula. Still, it comes as a shock to realize how much of "Rain" is reportage rather than fiction. In his notebooks written at the time of his journey to the South Seas, Maugham recorded his impression of the missionary's wife:

> [She] was a little woman with her hair very elaborately done, with prominent blue eyes behind gold-rimmed pince-nez; her face was long, like a sheep's, but she gave no impression of foolishness, rather of extreme alertness. She had the quick movements of a bird. The most noticeable thing about her was her voice, high, metallic and without inflection; it fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating the nerves like the clamour of a pneumatic drill.

This admirably economical character sketch was reproduced, with a very few minor changes, in the story itself; and the same is true of the sketch of the missionary himself and MacPhail the doctor. Moreover, Maugham did not even bother to change the name of his prostitute in his story. There was a prostitute on board the ship on which he himself sailed, and her name was Miss Thompson.

By ferreting around a little in the archives of the Gilbert Islands, I discovered a few more respects in which Maugham had cleaved closely to the most literal truth. Davidson and his wife explain their power to impose New England virtue on the Gilbert Islanders. Davidson controls membership of the church, and is able to expel backsliders. Dr. McPhail asks whether they mind being expelled, to which Davidson replies that it means virtual starvation for them, since they are unable thereafter to sell their copra or take part in fishing. "Tell him about Fred Ohlson," interposes Mrs. Davidson.

Davidson describes how a Danish trader

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of that name had sold whisky in the islands, drunk a lot, and consorted with native women for years. Davidson gave him the chance to mend his ways, but he laughed at him. In two years, however, he was a broken man, reduced to begging Davidson for a ticket to Sydney. Mrs. Davidson described how he had changed physically in that period, from a big powerful man to an aged wreck. I discovered in the archives that there had been a Danish trader in the Gilbert Islands who departed suddenly after many years, and his name was Fred Ohlsen.

Mrs. Davidson describes the Davidson's horror, when they first arrived in the islands, at the natives' complete lack of a sense of their own sinfulness.

> At the beginning of our stay Mr. Davidson said in one of his reports: the inhabitants of these islands will never be thoroughly Christianised till every boy of more than ten years is made to wear a pair of trousers.

As I was leafing through some missionary reports of the 1890s, I came across the following statement: "The natives will never be Christianised until they are made to wear trousers."

Mrs. Davidson is likewise horrified by the islander's addiction to dancing. She says

> But the native dancing . . . is not only immoral in itself, but it distinctly leads to immorality. However, I'm thankful to God that we stamped it out, and I don't think I'm wrong in saying that no one has danced in our district for eight years.

Caricature? The missionary reports of the time when the Davidsons arrived in the islands are full of eloquent denunciations of the native dancing. "We have nearly succeeded in putting it down," said the report. "There had, unfortunately, been a recrudescence in one village." And another report had these memorable words: "There has been no dancing in our district for eight years."

There is more to a story than verisimilitude, of course: and "Rain" remains a story, not a newspaper article. Some people have objected that Maugham's tales of exotic locations are too well-made, that they all have too neat an ending. The defense he would have made for himself (correctly, in my view) would have been that it is the function of the human intellect to impose order on the chaos of experience: that, indeed, is what we have brains for. To despise the well-made story is therefore implicitly to denigrate or deny the powers of the intellect.

But what of the charges that Maugham was superficial, callous, cynical, misanthropic, and snobbish? I do not see how they can possibly survive a reading of "Rain," or indeed of his other stories. The reverse is rather the truth: the smooth prose is a thin veneer that covers otherwise exposed and very raw nerves, his own as well as his characters'.

In this story, Maugham clearly favors common human pleasure against the demands of a too rigid morality, or moralism. His dry condemnation of the suppression of the native dancing—a suppression that really did take place, be it remembered—means that he did not share the sense of providential cultural and moral superiority that fuelled colonialism. By implication, then, "Rain" is anticolonial, though not stridently so. Colonialism harms the natives by depriving them of their culture and traps the colonialist in the amber of self-importance and priggishness. It is well to remember that these were not views that were universal in 1916 when Maugham voyaged, or even in 1920 when he wrote the story. And it is well to remember also that there are plenty of Mrs. Davidsons among us today, though they direct their moral enthusiasms in other directions than the suppression of dancing.

Maugham sided with the prostitute rather than with the missionary (perhaps not surprisingly, since he modelled himself so much on Maupassant). This speaks well of his generosity of spirit, for Sadie Thomp-

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son's vulgar pleasures were clearly not his own, and differences in taste often preclude sympathy. Maugham admitted to finding it difficult to talk to people, and wearied of all human company after an hour or two, wishing to return to his books. But he did not conclude from this that his pleasures were morally superior to those of people who preferred "the sound of the gramophone, harsh and loud, wheezing out a syncopated tune." A cultivated man, bilingual in English and French, widely read in the German and Spanish classics, and with enough Russian to read Chekhov, he learned a tolerance for those of lesser culture. "From the standpoint of what eternity," he asked in the *The Book-bag*, "is it better to have read a thousand books than to have ploughed a million furrows?" Whatever else may be said about this attitude, it is certainly not snobbish.

But Maugham does not sentimentalize Sadie Thompson. On the contrary: when Davidson has killed himself, she cruelly flaunts herself in front of his widow, laughs in her face and spits. She savors her triumph and at once resumes the way of life from which Davidson had tried to dissuade her. She decidedly does not have a heart of gold. He is as narrow in her sympathies as Davidson was.

Nor does Maugham make Davidson wholly inestimable. He is a medical missionary and his wife describes how, when he receives a message that someone is ill on another island, he unhesitatingly sets out in a canoe to do whatever he can for the ill person, even if a storm is raging. Having myself been on short journeys by canoe in those parts, I can testify to the courage involved. Davidson's faith in his god is so strong and absolute, however, that no objective danger can deter him from his duty. He is therefore no mere hypocrite, and if his methods are sometimes unscrupulous, he is so sure of his ends that he believes any means are justified to achieve them. In his own small sphere, Davidson typifies the disastrous human tendency—stronger in the twentieth century than in any other, perhaps—to let the belief in a salvationist ideal destroy common humanity.

But if Maugham depicts Davidson as an unattractive man, he does not invite us to gloat over his death as Sadie Thompson gloats over it. Quite the contrary: with a few deft descriptive touches, and with masterly understatement, Maugham gets us to imagine the truly titanic struggle in Davidson's soul that precedes his suicide: the struggle between the deeply held religious convictions that gave meaning to his life and work on the one hand, and sheer biological lust on the other. It is precisely because Davidson's convictions are so genuine that he kills himself: life after his lapse would be intolerable for him.

This is not cheap melodrama: it is real tragedy, and Maugham is inviting his readers to feel genuine compassion for a character whom he has set them up to dislike, and whom he dislikes himself. Resolutely antisentimental and realistic (there are no tearful reconciliation scenes between Sadie Thompson and Mrs. Davidson), Maugham is nevertheless demanding of the readers that they extend their emotional range, the very opposite of cynicism and misanthropy. In a brilliantly economical couple of lines, Maugham makes us feel deeply for the hitherto repulsive Mrs. Davidson. After Sadie Thompson laughed and spat at her:

> Mrs. Davidson cowered back, and two red spots rose suddenly to her cheeks. Then, covering up her face with her hands, she broke away and ran quickly up the stairs.

I don't see how anybody could read these simple words (the brilliance is in their simplicity) without understanding the terrible maelstrom in Mrs. Davidson's heart, and without feeling deep compassion for her.

"Rain" is a story which, while being enormously entertaining (Maugham is said to have earned over a million pre-war dollars from it), is also serious and profound. How do you make moral judgments while

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remaining tolerant? Clearly Maugham is not a complete relativist, otherwise he would have no standpoint from which to criticize the Davidsons. But it is also clear that he is opposed to a code of morality that imposes more upon man than he can bear. There is a dilemma here with which we still wrestle.

Time and again in his stories set in the South Seas and Malaya, Maugham achieves the same effects. He is able to create an unmistakable and unforgettable sense of place, and describe raw volcanic passion so vividly that the reader feels it as if it were his own, in the words of everyday speech. This is surely a considerable achievement.

Maugham was a highly intelligent, self-aware writer who knew what he was about. To call him shallow is itself shallow. In *The Summing Up*, Maugham reflects upon why it was that his meetings with expatriates in far-flung places was so important for him as a writer (and helps, incidentally, to explain why many other authors have found expatriate life an inspiration). The reflection itself could hardly have been better expressed:

> They [the expatriates] did not burn with a hard, gem-like flame, but with a hot, smoky, consuming fire. They had their own narrownesses. They had their prejudices. They were often dull and stupid. I did not care. . . . In civilized communities men's idiosyncrasies are mitigated by the necessity of conforming to certain rules of behaviour. Culture is a mask that hides their faces. Here people showed themselves bare. These heterogeneous creatures thrown into life that had preserved a great deal of its primitiveness had never felt the need to adapt themselves to conventional standards. Their peculiarities had been given the opportunity to develop unchecked. They seemed to me nearer to the elementals than any of the people I had been living with for so long and my heart leapt towards them.

It was as I was writing this essay that I suddenly remembered a Protestant missionary I had known while I was in the Gilbert Islands. In many ways he was not unlike Davidson:

> [Y]ou felt his affability was a duty he imposed upon himself Christianly; he was by nature reserved. . . . He was very tall and thin, with long limbs loosely jointed; hollow cheeks and curiously high cheek bones; he had so cadaverous an air that it surprised you to notice how full and sensual were his lips.

Times had changed, of course, and Davidson's uncompromisingly high-minded puritanism was no longer in fashion. It was accepted that any flock was bound to stray. Nevertheless, the missionary held himself to the highest standards. He was upright, scrupulous, and inflexibly kind. He lived up to his ideals. Then he had a brief extramarital affair. Consumed by remorse, he died by falling from the window of a mental asylum back at home.

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Poems
by Gibbons Ruark & Rachel Hadas

Little porch at night

Pull up a porch chair next to this chaise longue.
Tell me the empty dark will fill with voices
And talk to me before I end my song.

A summer night, and something has gone wrong
To rob the mild air of familiar faces.
Pull up a porch chair. Next to this chaise longue

A mother should be standing with her long
Hair tucked into a bun. Unwind those tresses
And talk to me before I end my song.

That vacant angle where a hammock hung
Adopts the whole moon in its loneliness.
Pull up a porch chair. Next to this chaise longue.

Summon the fireflies, matches struck and gone,
The Morse code of the stars who've lost their places,
And talk to me before I end my song,

For down there in the shallows should be strung
A taut line from a father to the sea he fishes.
Pull up a porch chair next to this chaise longue
And talk to me before I end my song.

—Gibbons Ruark

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Reading David Ferry's poems

The words run clear like water in these poems.
The fluency feels generous and easy,
naturally eloquent, carrying in its current
grains of incident and meditation.
Many tiny facets briefly flash
before they are carried downstream.
Lives shine and pass out of our sight, but whose
lives? The people of whom the poet writes
or ours, the readers'? These, yes; but also
the poet's. He is not immune to his
own fluency. Having set the process going,
having loosed the stream, he too is caught
up in it and carried
along in the clear lulling
flow of his own words,
even as it preserves him on the page,
the language sweeping him beyond our reach.

—*Rachel Hadas*

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On the other hand

No wonder we so love the dead. The living
are brittle, easily wounded,
petty, distracted by shadows,
ungrateful, obsessive, persistent,
needy, greedy, vain,
impulsive, wrapped in day's opacity.

Better at resisting
wishes, the dead are patient,
peaceable, deliberate.
Having skipped the jaws of appetite
as blithely as the pilot
who slipped the surly bonds of earth

they glide across the hours.
But that I see the dead
in peaceful places, in unhurried silence
doesn't mean they're never
desperate presences
hammering at the gates.

—*Rachel Hadas*

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Letter from Sarajevo

Muddling through in Bosnia

by Stephen Schwartz

Sarajevo is not one of the great European capitals. Its population stood at no more than 600,000 before the 1992–95 war in Bosnia-Hercegovina, and the effects of the long siege left it with half that. Peace has restored its population by a third, to 400,000, but it is a provincial center where the streets seem empty half the time—a De Chirico painting with mosques, perhaps—and where everybody seems to know one another.

But old Sarajevans, or *Sarajlije*, as they are known (the term is of Turkish origin), complain that today they do not recognize their neighbors. Too many real Sarajevo folk, they insist, fled to Germany, the U.S., and other places of refuge, leaving the city to a different set of refugees: Muslim peasants expelled from the towns of eastern Bosnia that remain within the so-called "Serb Republic" (Republika Srpska or R.S.) The Sarajlije sneer at these unfortunates, calling them *papci* or hillbillies.

The film director Ademir Kenović, whose work includes the first postwar Bosnian feature, *Perfect Circle* (1997), grimaces when he hears such comments. He considers the urban dislike for the rural immigrants a form of racism. But Kenović (himself a native of the city) is a man of great generosity who cannot speak ill of anybody, while other Sarajlije sneer at many. Their sensibility, which seems borrowed in some part from the Vienna of a century past, when the Habsburgs ruled here as well, is generally cynical, impossible to please. This attitude long predated the privations of the recent war.

The hard-shelled mentality of Sarajevo's elite, intellectual as well as political, has a classic depiction in the magnificent novel of the Bosnian author Meša Selimović, *Tvrdava* ("The Fortress"), which has just come out in an English translation (Northwestern, 1999). One must note that the translation contains inexcusable gaffes, but the power of the narrative is such as to make it nonetheless worth reading. Set in the 1770s, *The Fortress* portrays a veteran of the Russo-Turkish wars, the poor clerk and poet Ahmet Sabo, who having come back to his native Sarajevo finds his family dead of plague. Invited to a dinner of city swells, supposedly to honor military veterans, he gets moderately drunk and mildly bemoans the fate of war heroes who do not enjoy such hospitality. As a reward, he is assaulted, nearly killed, and, while unconscious, unknown thugs defecate and urinate on him. He even looses his miserable position as an assistant scribe. Many Sarajlije today would identify themselves with him. In such an environment, throwing a party can be dangerous. The first half-hour may feature an unpromising silence as individuals who loathe one another wait to see who will embarrass him- or herself by speaking first.

But most foreigners don't have parties with many Bosnian guests. The two worlds—international and local, to use the common vocabulary—do not merge. Europeans

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and Americans spend most of their free time with other expatriates, at places like The Bar, formerly the Internet Caffe. Newcomers may sometimes be found in the famous, or infamous, Holiday Inn, which was built for the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. The squat yellow box, one of the ugliest hotels in the history of hostelry, was a convenient target for Serbian snipers during the war. It has been completely refurbished, and is as depressing to behold as ever. It is no longer owned by the original chain, but its prices remain American, i.e., very high, and the bathrooms still feature paper sanitary strips over the toilet seats. One might be in Pocatello, except that they don't take credit cards. Most of the clientele are foreign experts on per diem.

When members of the international community do hold a bash, Bosnian guests are usually limited to a few members of the office staff who sit stiffly in a corner, saying nothing. For what, after all, is there to say? Local staff are paid about 10 percent of what the internationals make, so that a Bosnian university professor working as a translator in a foreign agency may take home about $600 per month, while his or her (foreign) boss is making $6,000, plus a housing allowance. Foreigners get the pick of homes and apartments, eat in restaurants that cater almost exclusively to them, and have a limitless supply of gasoline for their chauffeured vehicles. And everybody knows it.

Of course, not all the foreigners who show up in Sarajevo belong to that delicate class that has been called the "humanitarian mafia." Some are writers and artists, and some are even poor. Still, the time has long passed when international cultural stars like Susan Sontag routinely graced the city with their presence. But Sontag is irrelevant in today's Sarajevo. She came, she emoted, she emitted critical misjudgments, she went.

In one of her more memorable idiocies, Sontag compared the Bosnian war with the Spanish Civil War and complained that, unlike the Bosnian war, the Spanish conflict produced "some of the finest literature of [its] time." She even had the nerve to put Orwell, Hemingway, and Malraux in the same basket, thus placing Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* on a level with Hemingway's gassy *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Malraux's horrendous *L'Espoir*. Sontag bemoaned the absence of similar products from the Balkan cauldron. She was predictably wrong on all counts. Orwell's immortal classic was not intended to be "littrachoor," as Pound might have called it, but was merely accurate and heartfelt journalism. A number of reporters on the Bosnian war have published books that may be honorably compared with *Homage to Catalonia*, most notably Peter Maass, author of *Love Thy Neighbor*, Chuck Sudetić (*Blood and Vengeance*), and David Rohde (*A Safe Area*). Rather like Orwell, Maass and Sudetić were stirred by the hypocrisy they encountered in the Balkans to question their presumptions about themselves and their work.

And then, this past New Year, Sontag and her son David Rieff showed up again in Sarajevo. Of course, neither of them was prepared to admit the silliness, superficiality, and moral obtuseness of much they had done the earlier times they came. Their recent trip was motivated by cleverness rather than any posture of wounded conscience; they simply had to outdo their friends in finding a novel place to end the millennium. "David said 'Sarajevo' and I answered 'Of course,'" she told an interviewer, in a comment reminiscent of nothing so much as Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer*.

But chilly Sarajevo, suffering through the worst winter in fifty years, did not need them anymore, and their only achievement was to give a long interview to a thoroughly despicable weekly, *Dani* ("Days"), best described as a combination of, in its pretensions, *New York* magazine, and, in its methods and credibility, the *Weekly World News*. Therein, they preened as putative experts, as if they could read the pages of the magazine that was interviewing them.

As for Hemingway, the great failure, and Malraux, the grand fake, nobody reads their

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books about Spain today, and rightly so. Both volumes are dishonest, contrived, and inauthentic in virtually every detail. Hemingway portrayed Stalin's squalid mercenaries in the International Brigades as paragons of modern-day chivalry, and Malraux equated the Spanish anarchists with Christ's disciples, a serious insult to both parties.

This is not to say great writing was not produced by the Bosnian war. It was, but in the language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian and now as Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian, and little of it is likely to be translated into English. The Muslim Bosnian author Nedžad Ibrišimović is widely execrated among prickly Sarajlije for his closeness with the present domestic administration of President Alija Izetbegović, but his *Book of Adem Kahriman the Bosnian*, a slender prose narrative, little more than a short story, is brilliant as well as brief. The poet Amir Talić was locked up in Serbian concentration camps and prisons during the 1992–95 war. He has written a poem about the experience, reminiscent of Paul Celan, titled "Solitary Confinement," that bears reproduction in full:

Ironbound is the room in which I am alone
Iron hound is the guard of the hellish apparatus
Only my soul breathes free within me
She, my soul that cannot be betrayed

My brain sways in its little hut
Its floor wobbles with each heavy blow
Still her divine power floods me
Beneath her wings she shelters me

With the hangman's spittle the hellish apparatus sparkles
His murky eyes drown in mine, which are clear
Oh hangman my brother your frenzy will end
When my pain restores you to the right path

Many Sarajevo authors, including the best among them right now, the poet and film scenarist Abdulah Sidran (who co-authored the screenplay for *Perfect Circle*), are not only good writers who work to a high standard, but are also taken seriously as public figures. That fact, which is perhaps the single aspect of literary life that most distinguishes Europe from the U.S., was especially visible at the recent Sarajevo Poetry Days, an annual festival which began in 1961. Readings were held for a week at the House of Writers—a club typical of the former Communist world, but pleasant enough with its restaurant and patio—as well as in three high schools and at a downtown theater. The events were varied, but serious and dignified, and drew crowds of young people along with their parents.

Indeed, the readings had something of the air of a Russian literary evening as described in the memoirs of, say, Nadezhda Mandelstam—except that nobody appeared from the secret police to haul the poets off. Aside from Ibrisimović and Talić, the participants offered a range of styles and manners, including an author of charming verse for children, Ismet Bekrić.

Of course, a poet who writes for children would never be included in a mass reading in the U.S. or Britain, but that was not the only aspect of the Sarajevo festival that contrasted with Anglo-American fads. There was no glorification of perversion, no indulgence in detailed description of sex or self-mutilation, no playing for laughs as if in competition with stand-up comedians, no "spoken word" noise pollution or imitation "raps." There was no screaming of rage against men, heterosexuals, governments, systems, or even against Communism or the Serbs. Indeed, when the recent war was alluded to, references were muted, as in Talić's work.

Writers in Sarajevo do not need to be reminded of the ghastliness they lived through, but they do not use it as a pretext for bad writing, either. They are, however, obsessed with certain parallels—above all to the Holocaust—which may seem dubious to outsiders but are compelling to them. Most Bosnian Muslims are well aware that having survived in their majority, having

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put up an armed defense on their own territory, and having come under the protection of the West hardly puts them in the same category with East European Jewry of two generations past. Nevertheless, Bosnian Muslim intellectuals, as representatives of a European community whose Islamic affiliation made many Christian Europeans ignore their travails, identify strongly with the Jews of Poland and the Ukraine. This has led to a certain exaggerated affection for the Jews among Bosnian politicians; as Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish Community of Bosnia-Hercegovina, has remarked, "elsewhere the problem is anti-Semitism, here it is philo-Semitism," as each of the rival ethnicities, Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, seeks to curry favor with Jews.

At the same time, the first part of Finci's remark should not be overlooked. Sarajevo, a city that is presently 92 percent Muslim (reflecting both the aforementioned influx of rural refugees and postwar flight of Serbs), is extraordinarily free of anti-Jewish feeling, and it may well be the only major European city where the community center and synagogue (one of several open before the Holocaust) operate with no security measures in effect. The door stays wide open daily, and nobody is asked for identification, offering quite a contrast with Jewish community facilities in such cosmopolitan centers as Amsterdam and Barcelona, which feature buzzered doors and security guards.

The only interfaith problem currently affecting the Jewish community is that its paid staff is mainly composed of the non-Jewish, and the unconverted wives (some of them Muslim) of the community's leaders. This provokes grumbling among certain elderly Jews. But among its achievements, the Sarajevo Jewish Community operates the only remaining humanitarian soup kitchen left from the war, free to all comers of all faiths. Under the tutelage of the cantor, David Kamhi, who is also a professor of violin in the Sarajevo Musical Academy, a theater hall has been opened in the building.

Good relations between Bosnian Jews and Muslims mainly reflect the surviving influence of the Ottoman empire, which ruled Bosnia-Hercegovina for some 450 years, and its protection of the Sephardim, who still dominate Bosnian Jewry. Bosnian Muslims are genuinely sentimental about this history, never tiring of pointing out that the most famous Bosnian folk song, "*Kad ja podoh na Bembašu*" ("When I went to Bembaša), describing a man's disappointment with his flirtatious girlfriend, also exists in a Sephardic—and religious—version, sung in Judeo-Spanish or Ladino, and celebrating the conclusion of the Sabbath.

Regardless whether parallels between the agony of the Bosnian Muslims and the Holocaust are valid—I believe that in the end they are inappropriate—some interesting literary works have been written in Sarajevo about the Jews. The poet Admiral Mahić has a well-known poem, "The Old Sephard," which quite movingly describes the aforementioned David Kamhi, whose family was rescued from the Nazis by their Bosnian Muslim neighbors. The poet and essayist Hazim Akmadžić has produced an extraordinary novel, *Mislio Sam Da Je Mjesec Zut* ("I Thought It was a Yellow Moon"), about a dead Jew whose soul flies over Bosnia in wartime. The book well deserves translation into English, but it is unlikely given the general indifference toward new Balkan literature in the Anglo-Saxon world.

The poet Semezdin Mehmedinović (whose excellent *Sarajevo Blues* has been published in English, remarkably enough, by City Lights Books in San Francisco) has described the foundation of Bosnian culture as a melding of Islamic Sufism, Jewish kabbalah, and Franciscan-Catholic mysticism. Perhaps for this reason, Bosnian poets tend to write a lot about souls, theirs and others, but they manage to avoid pathos. Or rather, they leave it to certain foreign authors, whose form of solidarity with Bosnia-Hercegovina consists of composing maudlin, cartoonish verse about what they imagine

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to have happened—and which ends up all tears and histrionics.

To Bosnians, what happened between 1992 and 1995 was not a prolonged anxiety attack, or even a tragedy, but a crime, committed by ex-Communist politicians of all ethnicities, bent on holding onto their power no matter the consequences. But of course, that would not play well at a feminist poetry reading in New York or London, where descriptions of mass rape rendered in bad verse reduce the shock of such situations to second-hand atrocity propaganda. In reality, Bosnians are a little sick of hearing foreign poets talk about the siege and the war. If they are too polite to sneer openly at it, they nonetheless sneer silently.

Still, in the footsteps of Susan Sontag, the parade of foreign artistic mediocrities continues. A young Finnish musician arrives in Sarajevo and announces he has come "to make a statement for peace," to which the only proper response must be: Well, take a number. Nevertheless, after a few days one observes that he spends all his time with other foreigners, and has found no Bosnians to whom he may make his statement. A Canadian amateur filmmaker begins production of an utterly wretched, overacted, and badly conceived film in an attempt to "understand Bosnia," after spending no more than twenty-four hours in the country: it seemed she understood everything even before getting on the airplane from Toronto.

A characteristic event takes place on a Saturday night, toward the end of September. In an "open studio" at the end of the old Ottoman market, a crowd gathers for a vernissage. Two middling abstractionists born in what was once Yugoslavia, Nada Denić from Dalmatia and Milan Jakšić from Osijek—both in Croatia—display their works. They now live in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina—known for its wealth, sophistication, and political independence from the regime of Slobodan Milošević. But the real centerpiece of the evening is a long discourse by a German woman, Dr. Inge Landzettel, representing the town of Darmstadt, whose municipal officials are paying for the event. She is, it is said, originally from Vojvodina herself—one of those Germans displaced in the aftermath of World War II, in an earlier round of local "ethnic cleansing." She directs a personal, "performance art" effort called, modestly enough, the Inge Project.

With a look of sublime, nitwitted happiness, at having gained what seems a captive audience, she discourses interminably on war, peace, art, love, philosophy, mysticism, solitude, friendship, and "how wonderful it would be to live in a world without borders." Well, there were no borders between the Bosnians and their neighbors in the old Yugoslavia, and look what happened. Of course, the principle "good fences make good neighbors," memorably enunciated by Robert Frost, seems to have been enshrined in the 1995 Dayton Agreement, which institutionalized the division of Bosnia-Hercegovina into the R.S. and its counterpart, the Muslim-Croat Federation.

However, these days pretty much everybody honest, Bosnian and foreign alike, admits that Dayton, the crown jewel of Clintonite diplomacy, has failed miserably. There is, simply, no common ground between the great mass of ordinary Bosnians, Muslim, Serb, and Croat, who consider themselves Bosnians first, and the politicians whose interest is to maintain their separation. But nobody seems to have an alternative to Dayton, either. Bosnia ends up muddling through as it muddled along under the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, the royal Yugoslav regime of the 1920s and 1930s, and Titoite Communism.

Perhaps that is the way it was intended for Bosnia-Hercegovina to exist; certainly, intimate knowledge of the place leads one to agree with the cynical Sarajlije who sneer at all those foreigners whose pompous self-importance and ready-made solutions seem no more valid or valuable than the slogans and lies produced in the Spanish Civil War. Love us or hate us, they seem to say, but stop trying to rescue us. They have a point.

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Theater

Two cheers for the middlebrow

by Mark Steyn

What is a "transgressive" artist? There are two contrasting models around at the moment: In the first, Tim Robbins's new film *The Cradle Will Rock*, it is Marc Blitzstein, composer, lyricist and librettist of *The Cradle Will Rock*, a bit of 1930s agitprop commissioned and then cancelled by the Federal Theater Project. Orson Welles and John Houseman then led a famous march uptown to the Venice Theatre, at which Blitzstein, seated at the piano, performed the show himself. It is, of course, one of the all-time great Stalinist droners, set in Steeltown, USA, a municipality run by Mr. Mister entirely for the benefit of himself and a few cronies. Fortunately, down at the steel plant, Larry Foreman is organizing the workers to fight for union recognition.

As Robbins sees it, the defiant socialist composer was a victim of capitalism's assault on culture: the "right-wing" deemed the show too "dangerous" to stage. That's an odd way to look at a production that was scuppered by government bureaucrats and inflexible labor unions: after the FTP dropped the show and Houseman booked the Venice Theatre, it was the Musicians' Union and Actors' Equity that declined to allow their members to go along with the revised arrangements. As Houseman wrote in his memoirs, "The final fatal blow had been dealt by those very unions in whose defense the piece had been written."

Only the most humorless old socialist could fail to spot the ironies here, but Robbins does, every one. I once had the difficult task of hosting live on the BBC a Scottish Opera presentation of Blitzstein's *Regina*, his 1949 adaptation of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. On my big night in Scotland, the theater caught fire, but sadly not till the end of the show. By then I'd concluded that it's all but impossible to make a case for Blitzstein: he's Bernstein unredeemed by talent. His estate's kept afloat by the competent English lyric he wrote for Weill and Brecht's "Mack the Knife," which made the song an American pop standard. But, for Robbins, it's Blitzstein's Communism rather than his music that makes him a hero—though he's at pains to have Blitz explain that he's not formally a member of the Communist Party on account of his homosexuality—a neat example of the way more fashionable forms of transgression are used to validate some of the quainter, outmoded ones. As it turns out, Blitzstein paid a higher price for his sexual beliefs than his political ones: in 1964, he was murdered by a male prostitute on Martinique.

It seems incredible that anyone could contemplate a Broadway revival, as some critics are now suggesting, of the leaden, strident, witless, tuneless *Cradle Will Rock*. And Robbins's paean is the ultimate negation of the artistic spirit: at its core is the smug certainty that what an artist believes in counts for more than whether he's capable of expressing those beliefs in art. By timely contrast, our second backstage bio-

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drama, *Amadeus* (at the Music Box), presents us with both a truly transgressive artist and a compelling analysis of some of the structural defects of officially sanctioned arts regimes. The transgressor is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who turns up at the court of Emperor Joseph II of Austria and starts giggling and farting his way around the corridors of power. "Great art," some NEA type once told me, "cannot be housetrained." At the Hofburg, it's the great artist who cannot be house-trained—literally, if we're to believe that Mozart actually indulged in the coprophile fancies of his letters. But genius is entitled to be unruly if the quid pro quo is *The Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni*. Today, of course, the funding boys would tell him, "Hey, if you wanna nail down that grant, put some of those shit fantasies in the show." But the "Write what you know" injunction was less scrupulously observed in those days, and, in declining to take his home life to work with him, the scatalogical ninny instead gave voice in his art to the eternal human need for the divine. "I am in love with Mozart like a young girl," gushed Kierkegaard. "Immortal Mozart! I owe you everything; it is thanks to you that I lost my reason, that my soul was awestruck in the very depths of my being. . . . I have you to thank that I did not die without having loved." Nevertheless, Mozart followed the familiar trajectory of the transgressive: live fast, die young—or, in his case, live, fart, die young. Not for him the great wealth and honors of Salieri or, say, Sir Elton John, only the most famous unmarked pauper's grave of all time.

In Peter Shaffer's play, we begin in 1823. Mozart has been dead for thirty-two years and, approaching his own end, the seventy-three-year-old Antonio Salieri, Vienna's court composer, tells us that he, in fact, poisoned his rival. He addresses us directly, as "Ghosts of the Future," and beckons us back to 1781 to illumine the mystery—a kind of Why-I-Dunnit. After his own death, Salieri's music fell rapidly into obscurity but his dubious claim to have dispatched Mozart endeared him to posterity, inspiring a Pushkin play, a Rimsky-Korsakov opera (*Mozart and Salieri*), and eventually Shaffer's West End, Broadway, and Hollywood hit of twenty years ago. *Amadeus* is the apogee of Salieri's posthumous fame: he doesn't get billing, but he's the star role. (As they say in Hollywood, it's the parts that win Oscars, and this one won F. Murray Abraham his in the 1984 Milos Forman film version). No doubt to his own bemusement, Salieri is now a household name, despite not having any household tunes.

Shaffer distinguishes his protagonists in a deft shorthand: one guy does the anal jokes, the other's the anal character. While Mozart camps about doing his toilet talk, Salieri is shuttered down, a model of rectitude, self-doubt, festering anxieties, repressed passions. But, in his relationship both with God and the emperor, you feel a very contemporary hunger—one that Tim Robbins would certainly recognize. As a young man, Salieri asks God to make him a composer and give him "sufficient fame to enjoy it." Validation is his kick—the urge, not uncommon among competent mediocrities, to be pampered and toasted: make me famous, and fame will eventually make me good. In Shaffer's telling, Salieri spots Mozart's talent, resents it when it proves to be genius, and sets out to cripple it. Mozart doesn't need to beg: Salieri can hear in the music who is loved by God—i.e., "Amadeus." (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was known to some as Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart, and, though it means the same thing, as a title "Gottlieb" wouldn't work half as well.) Salieri curses God, for how could God have given the gift for which the Hapsburg court composer is so eminently suited to a potty-mouthed brat? It is not necessary for Salieri actually to have administered poison. In poisoning Mozart's prospects at the Imperial court, the Italian faction, led by Salieri, destroyed his life.

Shaffer's play is a rarity in our time—an unashamedly theatrical piece that embedded itself in the broader consciousness. Take that title: at the start of the BBC's present year-

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long Bach retrospective, I heard someone refer to our scant knowledge of Bach's personality by saying he couldn't imagine anyone doing a play called *Sebastian*. Around the time of *Phantom of the Opera*, the British satirical show *Spitting Image* announced that, following the success of *Amadeus*, the story of a composer who farts too much, Peter Shaffer was now working on *Lloyd*, the story of a fart who composes too much. *Amadeus* was the only production Mrs. Thatcher went to see during Peter Hall's fifteen-year tenure at the National Theatre in London, and she gave him what he calls "a severe wigging" for the play's portrayal of Mozart. It was inconceivable, she said, that a man who wrote exquisite and elegant music could be so foul-mouthed. On the other side, the Prince of Wales was among its admirers, declaring that its insights into the composer's work were invaluable. In what Hall regards as the dark days of the Thatcher cuts, the millions of pounds in royalties from *Amadeus* helped keep the National afloat.

To see it again is to be made sharply aware of how much has changed in the fifteen years since the original West End/Broadway/national touring production faded away. Shaffer's play is a definitive middlebrow entertainment. I don't mean that in any pejorative sense. Robert Fox, the producer of Shaffer's hit of a decade later *Lettice and Lovage*, once moaned to me: "Critics say, 'Oh, it's only a boulevard comedy'—as if there's something wrong with that, as if it's easy to write a successful comedy." Likewise, there's nothing wrong with being "only" a middlebrow masterpiece. A few years back, Shaffer told me he'd had an English teacher at school who, week by week, unveiled the plot of *Hamlet* as if it were a cliffhanger serial. That's essentially Shaffer's skill, the ability to organize and compress narrative: if his teacher had attempted *Othello* as a backstage thriller, you'd have had the germ of *Amadeus*. At various points, Shaffer's play can be glib, exhibitionist, too obtrusively structured, and too pat in its use of supporting characters for expository shorthand. Mozart himself might have been reminded of those old-school operas he loathed, the kind that are unable to transcend the conventions. The standard criticism of the middlebrow is that it gives you the intimation of great art but also the illusion that great art is easy. At the core of *Amadeus* are huge, powerful, overwhelming issues and emotions, yet, for all his eloquence, you sense that Shaffer is only skating the surface, unable to crack the core.

And yet what else would you do in the face of Mozart? Shaffer may not know how to explain Mozart, but he knows enough not to try to explain him and risk winding up as another Kierkegaardian schoolgirl. The play has a proper sense of its own modesty because its theme is, at one level, ordinariness: the ordinariness of us all—Salieri, Shaffer, Hall, Blitzstein, Tim Robbins, you, me—when measured against that rarest of conditions, genius. Shaffer was a music critic before he was a playwright and his knowledge of his subject and command of form combine to make the lesser composer, Salieri, the human filter through which to contemplate the greater one. The signature moment of the play comes when Salieri first encounters Mozart's music. As the Wind Serenade floats across the stage, "a single note on the oboe hung there unwavering, piercing me through. It had me trembling." It's a moment of beauty, to be sure, but also of intense pain. It's not about Mozart, but the pain of not being Mozart. Shaffer has written much better plays (generally speaking, I prefer the boulevard comedy stuff to the self-conscious profundities of *Equus* and *Royal Hunt of the Sun*), but, as individual moments go, this one is something any playwright would be justly proud of. Suddenly, we understand Salieri's agony: God has not endowed him with Mozart's art, yet God has endowed him sufficiently to recognize Mozart's art. This isn't simple showbiz resentment, but a purer, musical hurt: it's not the possibility that Mozart will become famous, but the knowledge that he is great.

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In Peter Hall's revival at the Music Box, the moment lacks the punch it ought to have. That's for two reasons. The first is a casting imbalance. Most plays are about a relationship, so, while a shift in the balance may change the work, it doesn't necessarily undermine it. In *The King and I*, for example, the star role was supposed to be Anna. But, when Gertrude Lawrence died early in the run, the muscle in the title shifted to the King—Yul Brynner—and stayed there until Brynner's own death over three decades later. At one level, *Lettice and Lovage* is Shaffer's comedic exploration of *Amadeus*'s theme, setting up again in obsessive opposition the conformist (Lotte) and the outsider (Lettice): it would be possible to adjust the relative weight of its principals without eviscerating the piece.

Amadeus, however, is far less flexible: it's not about the interaction of character (as Shaffer's best plays are), but one character as viewed through another. Salieri has to bear the emotional burthen, as he did in the hands of Paul Scofield, John Wood, Frank Langella and others. But in the Music Box production (from London's Old Vic via Los Angeles) the role has gone to David Suchet, best known as TV's Hercule Poirot. Suchet always seemed faintly embarrassed to be playing Agatha Christie's vain, strutting, comical little Belgian, and he compensated by downplaying Dame Agatha's accumulation of traits (she doesn't really go in for character) to the point of invisibility, until all that was left were "the little grey cells." That's fine for detective fiction, but Suchet seems to be unable to shake it off. This is a low-key, muted, cerebral performance that leaves you little sense either of Salieri's internal bitterness or his urbane court persona.

Shaffer, with exemplary craftsmanship, builds his plays with springboards for actors, and *Amadeus* is no exception: the first one occurs early on, as the aged Salieri casts off his old man's robes and is reborn as his younger self, the polished, accomplished composer of the Habsburg court. Suchet lets this scene pass for nothing: he might as well be strolling in from the yard and hanging up his coat. Alongside Suchet's subdued, underpowered reading is a performance of transfixing theatricality from Michael Sheen as Mozart. Twitchy, fidgety, shrieking with laughter, fizzing with energy: Sheen is mesmerizing. For the first time, Amadeus really is the title role.

But the second reason why this production lacks the fire of the original is Shaffer's repointing of his own text. He's toned down the toilet talk on Mozart's part and warmed and rounded his characterization of Salieri. Much of Shaffer's work explores the contrast between the free spirit and the shuttered soul, but here, far more than before, he identifies himself, for better or worse, with Salieri. Some of my harsher colleagues see this as an acceptance of the inevitable: Shaffer, they say, is a competent journeyman like Salieri; he's had some big hits, but they're conventional, of their day, they won't survive. Well, who can say? Shaffer helped Mozart to a three-year run on Broadway, which is two years and eleven months longer than Mozart's ever run on the Main Stem without Shaffer's help. But, curiously, the stronger identification with Salieri has exactly the opposite effect to that intended. At the Music Box, life imitates art, and Sheen's Mozart buries Suchet's Salieri.

The best thing about middlebrow art is its ability to seize something complex and mysterious and identify something grippingly human about it. That's what Shaffer did in *Amadeus* at the National Theatre twenty-one years ago, and, if the work seems sadder and less confident now, that may be because of the virtual elimination of the middlebrow in the intervening decades. Coprophile jokes aside, Shaffer's play symbolized the kind of aspirant middle-class culture we took for granted until very recently: you might wind up with a Reader's Digest version of great art but at least you were pointing in the right direction. Now "middlebrow" means a film-school graduate riffing on Elvis or Abba or gangsta rap. If you want proof, look no further than New

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Year's Eve at the Lincoln Memorial. Say what you like about Camelot, but if the Kennedys had been around for Y2K you'd at least have had a sprinkling of cellists and ballerinas among the pop and movie stars.

But these days you're more likely to find Howard Stern than Isaac Stern in the White House. So no pretence here of celebrating the best of the American century, or even the usual suspects: no Bernstein, Copland, Gershwin, Frost, Dos Passos, Langston Hughes. In the Clinton junk-food presidency, there's no room for all that stuff. The more the network anchors insisted we were on the brink of an exciting new era, the more it seemed like some tired oldies station. The capital city of a nation whose global dominance exceeds the wildest ambitions of nineteenth-century empire builders—and how were they celebrating? With Tom Jones. A 1960s pop star. From Wales. Singing not some overwrought millennial anthem but only "I'm gonna wait till the midnight hour/ That's when my love comes tumblin' down" as the president grooved along approvingly. One of the most poignant scenes in *Amadeus* is the merest variation of the "And then I wrote . . ." moment in the corniest Hollywood musical: Salieri has composed a flat-footed march to welcome Mozart to Vienna; the younger man gives it the once over, doodles around on the harpsichord and—presto—the trite plunkings of the composer-in-residence have been transformed into "Non piu andrai" from *Figaro*. It's an irresistible bit of showmanship, but you have to wonder not only whether in years to come Broadway audiences will recognize the aria but whether they'll even be able to hear the difference.

But even a critic shouldn't be that pessimistic. So let me put in a good word for a couple of one-man one-acts I caught at the Jermyn Street Theatre in London that, though irredeemably British in their preoccupations, suggest some potentially rich soil for American dramatists. Even on the most casual cruise of the bookstore, you'll notice the ever swelling numbers of nonfiction books written from deep inside almost dementedly self-enclosed business environments that are somehow regarded as "sexy." Alex Rowe has had the bright idea of adapting, as vehicles for himself, a couple of these inside-the-bunker tomes, both by Simon Garfield. Neither will mean much to American audiences, though for Londoners they're a hoot.

The Wrestling concerns an old-school grunt'n'groaner who pines for the good old days of British telly wrestling (the 1970s) and dreams of relaunching himself in the U.S., where wrestling is bigger than ever. But Rowe also provides hilarious thumbnail sketches of the sport's British heroes—Count Bartelli (who's in fact a bloke called Jeff), the samurai Kendo Nagasaki (who's in fact a black country lad from the industrial Midlands), the gay wrestler Adrian Street (who's in fact straight).

The second play, *Radio One*, is about the BBC's pop music station, and is a much more vivid summation of the tension between state funding and the marketplace than anything in *Cradle Will Rock*. It's based on Garfield's account of the arrival of a new controller for the channel, Matthew Bannister, and his determination to rid the BBC's "youth" network of its fifty-year-old greying disc-jockies in their U2 tour jackets. He did so, but only at the loss of more listeners in one fell swoop than at any other time in BBC history. This time Rowe gets to play not only the controller but a phalanx of grisly boss jocks. The current occupant of the morning show, a young lady called Zoe Ball, is played by an upside-down kitchen mop, who in truth is rather more entertaining.

Though these names are doubtless obscure to *New Criterion* readers, the form is cheap, cheerful, and easily adaptable to obsessions on this side of the Atlantic. There will be dozens of books written about the AOL/Time Warner merger. There ought to be room for one hilarious stage show, too.

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Art

Two views of Caravaggio

by Karen Wilkin

It's difficult to believe, given the current high reputation of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), that he was ever considered to be anything but one of the great figures of Italian painting. To his contemporaries, his horrifying, voluptuous religious dramas—cinematic stagings of crucial instants in the lives of saints and martyrs, briefly illuminated for a rapt audience by shafts of dazzling light—seemed the most exciting work of the time; witness the numbers of painters who assiduously followed his lead. Today, even though they are in many ways paradigmatic of the values of the fiercely religious Counter-Reformation Rome where Caravaggio mainly worked, from about 1590 to 1606, his paintings bear witness to an individual struggle between official pieties and personal observation that seems timeless. Yet, from the mid-seventeenth century until about fifty years ago, Caravaggio would not have been included in a list of megastars of Italian painting.

In his own day, Caravaggio riveted collectors and fellow artists alike with his virtuoso reporting on things seen. Sophisticated viewers were struck by his insistence on specifics, with his ability to translate subtle optical and tactile distinctions into painterly effects—a sharp-eyed realism that he described in what amounts to his only documented statement about art as knowing "how to paint well and to imitate natural things well." In the category of natural things, he included the transparency and reflectiveness of glass, the subtle color shifts of overripe fruit, and the differences between velvet and silk, metal and pottery, young skin and old. He celebrated everything from the smooth bodies of adolescent boys to the knotted muscles of brawny workmen, from the rounded cheeks of pretty young women to the wrinkles of shrewd old crones, equally engaged, it seems, by come-hither smiles and features distorted by pain. Caravaggio is supposed to have maintained that there was "as much workmanship" in a still life as in a figure, a remarkable notion in an age when painters were measured by their ability to produce large scale, complex narrative pictures.

Not that he didn't produce large scale, complex narrative pictures. But they, too, were informed by his fascination with "natural things." The cast of characters that populates Caravaggio's pictures—young toughs in plumed hats, old bald men, appetizing young women, and curly-haired street kids—all seem to have walked into the studio from the *vicoli* of his working-class Campo Marzio neighborhood. One of Caravaggio's early biographers recounts a probably apocryphal story, inspired by an early picture of a larcenous fortune teller and her victim, about Caravaggio's recruiting a gypsy off the street to pose in order to prove that actuality was interesting enough to become the basis for art. Whether or not the story is true, his figures have a startling physicality and intimacy, a sense that they

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recount accurately what the painter saw. (No one painted dirty feet more convincingly.) Caravaggio's madonnas heft robust toddlers who are tired of posing and want down. His angels require the support of sturdy clouds to hover above martyred saints. Instead of idealizing his subjects, "correcting nature's imperfect parts by her perfect ones," as sound academic practice required, Caravaggio presented them with apparently uncritical directness, as seemingly unedited "natural things."

Sometimes this attachment to the unruly appearances of actuality got him into trouble with church authorities determined to enforce standards of decorum, but Caravaggio's private patrons (even the cardinals) were usually delighted with whatever he did; some eagerly acquired, at bargain rates, altarpieces rejected by the church as "indecent." During his working lifetime, and for some years after his death at thirty-nine, Caravaggio's innovations proved irresistible not only to collectors, but also to scores of artists his own age and slightly younger, from all over Europe—the Caravaggeschi—who imitated his themes, figure types, and evocative handling of light and dark. Artists as diverse as Carlo Saraceni, Diego Velázquez, Georges de la Tour, and Jusepe de Ribera, among many others, kept Caravaggio's influence alive well into the seventeenth century.

Yet Caravaggio's brand of theatrical realism was anathema to a later generation of high-minded High Baroque painters, such as the antiquity-worshipping Poussin who said that Caravaggio had "come into the world to destroy painting." Merely imitating natural things, right-thinking art cognoscenti maintained, was too easy. Significant, important art demanded not an appreciation of the unpredictable irregularities of reality, but an understanding of ideal beauty as defined by the Greeks and Romans, Raphael and Michelangelo, along with a command of geometrically ordered composition and perspectival space, and, above all, with a mastery of drawing, through which the painter exhibited his grasp of ideal beauty and geometric order. Caravaggio's pictures, rooted as they were in the observable world, painted directly from life without carefully plotted preparatory drawings, the images thrust forward almost into the viewer's own space, failed to meet these criteria. His once-stellar reputation plummeted and many of his paintings were lost or attributed to other artists. It wasn't until the twentieth century, especially after 1951, when the great Italian art historian, Roberto Longhi, mounted the pioneering exhibition "Caravaggio and the Caravaggeschi" in Milano, that this master director of spotlit dramas reclaimed his former place in the art historical spotlight.

Since Longhi's "rediscovery," Caravaggio scholars have been slowly reconstituting his oeuvre and piecing together his history. Exhibitions have been organized. Publications have proliferated: a steadily growing accumulation of important studies that reflect the evolving and sometimes contentious views of many distinguished art historians, from Longhi himself and the legendary Walter Friedlaender, early on, to Howard Hibbard and Keith Christiansen, more recently. Over the past decade or so, a long list of mostly Italian scholars, patiently scrutinizing pictures and combing through archives, have discovered crucial bits of information. (And let's not forget Frank Stella's examination of Caravaggio's pivotal relevance to contemporary painting in a Harvard lecture series, published as *Working Space*.)

Everyone agrees that Caravaggio is a great, compelling artist whose work stops us dead in our tracks by its sheer intensity. Everyone agrees, too, that this astonishingly gifted painter was difficult, unpredictable, and violent—notably so even in an age of constant street fighting, food riots, and brutal executions. Otherwise, there are almost as many Caravaggios as there are publications: the impassioned rebel who broke with academic conventions by substituting direct observation of the world around him for

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generalized concepts of ideal beauty, and the brilliant synthesizer of the traditions of Lombard realism and Venetian classicism; the inspired re-interpreter of religious imagery who took Rome by storm with his first big public commissions, and the willful nonconformist constantly in trouble with the authorities for violating prescribed decorum in his pictures; the street-brawler/tough guy living in poverty among whores and homeboys, and the acclaimed young genius, installed in the palazzi of cardinals and noblemen, protected all his short, turbulent life by powerful patrons. There is the proto-modernist Caravaggio, the metaphysical Caravaggio, the intellectual Caravaggio, the low-life Caravaggio, the gay Caravaggio, the straight Caravaggio, and more. Curiously, despite all the intensive research and the scrupulous scholarship, Michelangelo Merisi remains an elusive, enigmatic figure. (Even the spelling of his surname is in doubt, appearing in strikingly different ways in various documents—even allowing for the vagaries of spelling of the period.)

Not all of Caravaggio's sixty or so surviving paintings are accepted by all scholars, and their dates and sequences are also in dispute. There are no existing drawings, no sketchbooks, no notebooks, no letters, and few biographical records. Everything that *is* known about Caravaggio's life has been gleaned from marginally related documents or inferred from indirect sources, some of dubious reliability. In short, a biographer's nightmare: a subject whose history is full of gaps, and whose portrait must be assembled like a jigsaw puzzle—with a large number of randomly distributed pieces missing and many of the rest mixed in with the bits of other jigsaws. None of which has deterred Helen Langdon or Peter Robb, the intrepid writers whose biographies,[1] respectively titled *Caravaggio: A Life* and *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio* are the two newest additions to the Caravaggio shelf.

Neither Langdon nor Robb pretends to have done original research; both aim to summarize and synthesize the most up-to-date available information. Langdon does so by dispassionately presenting occasionally conflicting theories for comparison, while Robb offers a more partisan, decidedly personal interpretation. Each of them has a slightly different list of authentic works and a favorite new contender for inclusion in the Caravaggio canon, but both of them draw heavily upon (and give full credit to) the same works by the Caravaggio specialists who have preceded them. This means that reading Langdon's and Robb's efforts in rapid succession is a lot like seeing an Italian version of *Rashomon*, moved up a few hundred years; we are offered virtually the same information in each book, but the spin put on the facts and the narrator's conclusions often differ radically.

Of course, interpretation and spin are endemic to Caravaggio studies. Much of the generally accepted facts of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's history are based on extrapolation, assumption, and inference. Who his parents were and that he was born in 1571 are established, even though his birth was not recorded; he apparently took two years off his age when he first came to Rome from Milano, and later denied the existence of his brother; the discovery of wills, records of the sale of family property, and the like has filled in some gaps. But it's not known whether Merisi was born in Milano, where his father was attached to the household of the aristocratic, powerful Colonnas (who were related to the even more aristocratic, powerful Sforzas) or in nearby Caravaggio, the family hometown. Nor is the day of his birth known, although it has been cleverly suggested, because of his name, that it was September 29th, the feast of the Archangel St. Michael. Caravaggio's death remains even more mysterious, reported only by hearsay, with the date, place, and cause still matters for speculation.

1 *Caravaggio: A Life*, by Helen Langdon; Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 436 pages, $30. *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio*, by Peter Robb; Henry Holt and Company, 565 pages, $30.

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The starting point for Caravaggio studies are the biographies written by his contemporaries. The most reliable and earliest, dating from between 1617 and 1630, is by the eccentric physician, collector, connoisseur, dealer, and writer on art Giulio Mancini. He knew Caravaggio well—especially during his first years in Rome—treated him when he was ill, and collected his work. Next, chronologically, comes a short entry in a 1642 *Lives of the Artists* by Caravaggio's fellow painter, Giovanni Baglione. The two men knew each other, but Baglione's version of his colleague's history is open to question since it wasn't published until more than thirty years after Caravaggio's death and the two painters were not only professional rivals, but bitter enemies. In 1603, Baglione brought and won a rancorous libel suit against Caravaggio and some of his friends, accusing them of circulating rude verses ridiculing Baglione's paintings. The victim was said never to have stopped being angry about the incident, so it is unfortunate that his biography of Caravaggio should be the basis of a later one by Giovan Pietro Bellori, published in 1672. Bellori adds some seemingly well-researched information, but he was a close friend and admirer of Poussin's, and we know what Poussin thought about Caravaggio. Personal biases notwithstanding, all of these early writers agree in saying that Caravaggio was quick to take offense and quick to fight when offended. There's a famous story about his attacking a waiter who refused to tell him whether a dish of artichokes was cooked in oil or butter.

Everything else has been painstakingly assembled from sources ranging from contracts for paintings to letters from the Roman agent of a frustrated would-be collector explaining why no paintings by Caravaggio were available at that time. Dates have been established by records of payment schedules or of the cost of installing works commissioned for chapels—or in some instances, records of refusals to accept works. Among the more direct sources are mentions in *avvisi*, the newspaper-type information reports of the period. Letters, usually a prime source, figure little in the list of Caravaggio documents, but as Robb perceptively points out, during the period when the painter worked, the church functioned as a kind of thought police, seeking out and repressing any deviation from orthodoxy. In an age of forbidden books and forbidden images, Robb surmises, people would have been reluctant to commit anything possibly incriminating to paper, or would have destroyed anything compromising—such as a description of Caravaggio's latest misdemeanor—after reading it.

So it's perhaps not surprising, especially given the gang warfare atmosphere of Caravaggio's Rome and his reputation for violence and short-temper, that much of the information that survives about him comes from police records, the accounts of his frequent brushes with the law. Caravaggio was arrested, questioned, and even jailed several times, for offenses ranging from wearing a sword after dark without a license (forbidden, in a futile effort to control violence), to throwing stones, brawling, and sword fighting—not to mention libel. His wealthy, well-connected patrons usually managed to intervene on their protegé's behalf, but once he had to leave town briefly until things cooled off, and in 1606, a brawl on the tennis courts of the Campo Marzio ended with a long-standing adversary's bleeding to death. Caravaggio, condemned as a homicide, fled first to Naples and then to Malta and Sicily, to escape prosecution and allow his protectors to try to arrange a pardon.

At this point, part of the story is told by the paintings that he produced in exile, which include some of his most innovative and arresting images. Part of it is told by the records of the Knights of St. John, an aristocratic monastic-military order based on the island of Malta, which accepted Caravaggio to its ranks because of influence exerted on his behalf from high places and in exchange, it seems, for a group of important and remarkable paintings. Soon after being

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made a Knight of St. John, however, Caravaggio was stricken from the order and imprisoned for a crime of which there is no record in Malta, but which is said by early biographers to have been an attack on a "noble knight," a serious matter for a low-born artist. He escaped to Sicily—how is unknown, although he must have had help, unless he was never in prison in the first place—where, as in Naples and Malta, his fame preceded him and he was warmly welcomed and his work eagerly sought. What happened next is unclear. As reported by his early biographers, he seems to have been on his way back to Rome, with assurances of a pardon, when he died, completely alone, of a fever. Exactly where and when, and even why, remains open to debate.

These are the bones of the story told by both Langdon and Robb. They flesh it out with abundant and often fascinating material about the period, Caravaggio's wealthy and cultivated patrons, poets, scientists, fellow artists, and even the courtesans and street boys who posed for him. The organizing principle of both books is the evolution of Caravaggio's work. Here Langdon and Robb differ, not only as to which works they accept, but also as to chronology, which in turn leads to further variations in their ideas about how the work developed, since both see Caravaggio's work as a reflection of his life at any given moment. Robb, for example, sees the notable transparency, sparseness, and looseness of many of Caravaggio's post-Roman works as the result of working in haste while on the run, while Langdon sees changes in the work as not only tied to changes in place and changes in models, but also (rather simplistically, it must be said) as bound up with the artist's state of mind.

The differences between the two books serve to give us a more vivid sense of each of the biographers than of Caravaggio himself. Robb is brash, slangy, self-assured. (No, it isn't just that he is Australian.) Langdon is polite, careful to the point of being cautious. She doesn't seem to have ever met an idea that she could support wholeheartedly and hedges her statements with self-protective, albeit scholarly "may haves," "perhapses," and "might well have beens." Robb, by contrast, is more than willing to assert unequivocally anything that fits his assumptions, presenting almost all of his notions as unquestionable. Where the two differ most acutely is on Caravaggio's sexuality—which again probably tells us more about each of the authors than about their subject. Robb, like several respected Caravaggio scholars, including Hibbard, is certain of the painter's homosexuality; it is a key issue in his reconstruction of Caravaggio's life and death. Langdon dismisses this as "a cliché in England [that] has never been current in Italy" and cites Creighton Gilbert as a "powerful voice" who demonstrated "that the historical evidence for Caravaggio's homosexuality is extremely flimsy." (But she wholly rejects the view, which Robb embraces, that the model for two of Caravaggio's most sensuous Roman madonnas was a much admired prostitute with whom the painter may have been involved, preferring the opinion of an early writer—one who got a lot of other, crucial, things wrong, however—that she was "poor but honorable.")

Robb and Langdon differ, too, on the last years of Caravaggio's life. Langdon subscribes to the "official" version: a productive stay in Naples, a long sojourn on Malta to enhance his chances of pardon by joining the order, an attack on a social superior, flight to and a productive stay in Sicily, promise of a pardon, death from fever at Porto Ercole on his way back to Rome via Naples. Robb questions it all. Caravaggio, he believes, made more works in Naples than seems reasonable for the length of time he spent there before going to Malta. (Langdon doesn't accept them all.) Therefore, Caravaggio must have gone from Malta to Naples and back, rather than remaining for almost a year with the knights, to complete these works. But this is minor. More important, Robb simply re-

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fuses to believe Bellori's version of Caravaggio's end. Instead, he sees a careful coverup of an execution for a homosexual sex crime, the only offense, he maintains, grave enough to warrant expulsion from the order but shocking enough, under the circumstances, not to have been recorded in the list of crimes committed by knights during Caravaggio's stay. As evidence, Robb notes the order's reputation as a "never ask, never tell" largely male enclave. He also cites the celebrated fondness of the order's grand master, whose portrait Caravaggio painted and who was instrumental in accepting the otherwise unsuitable painter as a knight, for the pubescent sons of noble families, whom he brought to the island in large numbers to serve as pages. Did Caravaggio do something unspeakable with one of the grand master's favorites?

Robb's theory is that the painter had help escaping from Malta, but his enemies caught up with him and hounded him out of Sicily, tricking him with a promise of a pardon, and probably murdered him en route to Rome. For Robb, the official story of where and how Caravaggio met his end makes no sense—Porto Ercole is well north of Rome, hardly on the way from Naples—while the complicated story of what happened to the pictures he was bringing with him to Rome, supposedly as gifts for his pardoners, suggests to Robb advance information and conspiracy. He's pretty convincing.

Langdon is detached and factual, offering a wealth of information. Her discussion of Caravaggio's early paintings of musicians, the various versions of the solo lute player and the Metropolitan's oddly composed group, includes a long section on musical entertainments, banquets, and the life of Caravaggio's remarkable patron of his early years, the cultivated Cardinal Del Monte. Robb sees the musicians as portraits of Caravaggio's boy companions and regards the time he spent in Del Monte's establishment as useful but restrictive, maintaining that the painter was trying to conform to established standards of taste and came into his own only when he lived and worked for other patrons. (Never mind, it seems, about youthful style.) From Langdon, however, we learn about the musical practice of the late 1500s, a time of growing admiration for the solo voice and for professional singers. She speculates about the identity of Caravaggio's sitters, suggesting that one might be a famous castrato of the period. It's certainly more wide-ranging than what we get from Robb, and it should be enthralling, but unfortunately, while her information is undeniably interesting, Langdon's writing is a little flat. She tends to state a proposition and then marshal the evidence that supports it, eliminating surprises and discouraging the reader from drawing conclusions. When she discusses Caravaggio's paintings, she is almost entirely taken up with subject matter. Her formal analysis tends to lean heavily on repetitive observations about the coexistence of naturalism, idealism, and a deep awareness of tradition in his work.

Robb takes a more novelistic approach. He is better at imagining what events of the past might have felt like, physically and emotionally, and at bringing remote, confusing events to life, but he has irritating habits. *M* is full of other writers' work, with the occasional passage used more than once, sometimes in large chunks quoted wholesale, sometimes in short phrases spliced into long sentences and set off with italics. (No vulgar quotation marks in this book.) Everything is carefully credited, but the effect is awkward and lazy, as though Robb couldn't be bothered to digest or even paraphrase the fruits of his considerable research. It's surprising because he can write perceptively and illuminatingly, albeit with a self-consciously butch liking for what, I assume, is Australian slang. He is particularly attached to the verb "to perve," which seems to mean to catch a surreptitious look. He is also annoyingly fond of colloquial contractions, littering his text with oddities like "wouldn't've," and determined to translate all titles in shorthand,

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so that Caravaggio's Roman masterpiece, usually known as *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* becomes "Matthew Killed."

It's instructive, if not altogether fair, to compare Langdon and Robb on similar works—say, Caravaggio's first Neapolitan efforts, an impressive group of paintings that includes the stunning, crowded, spatially brilliant *Seven Works of Mercy* (1606–7, Chiesa del Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples) and the tense *Madonna of the Rosary* (1606–7, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). "His art responded immediately to the brutal city of Naples with a new, harsh darkness," Langdon writes.

> New models appear, southern Italians, with browned weather-beaten skins, goitrous throats, and inward-turned expressions of fatalistic suffering. There is a sense of the Neapolitan crowd, urgent and feverish, and evocative of the turbulence of Caravaggio's own life.

Robb writes:

> Nobody could've responded more keenly to this enhancement of the everyday than the painter who saw Christian *history* embodied in his friends and neighbors, playing out *actions* he painted *from life*. Or been more aware of the extraordinary changes wrought by Neapolitan light and darkness on the city's spaces—the blackness of the narrow alleys, the close unlit interiors, then shot through at a certain moment of the day by a dazzling shaft of blinding Mediterranean sun or brought suddenly alive by the flare of a lit torch.

I leave readers to decide which is more factually relevant and which evokes more vividly the atmosphere of Caravaggio's Neapolitan altarpieces. Neither Langdon's *Caravaggio* nor Robb's *M* is the definitive biography of this most elusive of painters. Perhaps the best thing would be to read the two books the way Alice ate the mushroom in *Through the Looking-glass*, nibbling at first one side and then the other until you obtain a balanced result.

Exhibition notes

"Angelo Ippolito: A Selection of Paintings and Works on Paper" at the New York Studio School. November 29, 1999–January 8, 2000

The exhibition pamphlet for "Angelo Ippolito: A Selection of Paintings and Works on Paper" states that Ippolito's subject is "light," which may be true, but his is a light unlike any seen in the natural world. His colors are far more iridescent—almost Day-Glo—than those produced by the sun. Born in Italy, Ippolito has lived and worked in upstate New York for more than twenty-five years, painting landscape-derived abstractions, which recall Hans Hofmann's pulsating canvases.

In the best paintings on display here—generally the large oils—Ippolito achieves a brazen luminosity, with rectilinear shapes and brushstrokes emerging from expanses of bright colors. Of course, in abstractions such as these, composition weighs equally with color in the success of the work. A large field of fluorescent orange on which geometric marks in a number of colors—magenta, purple, red—appear, *Kusadasi Bazaar* (1991) holds most of its pictorial activity in the center of the canvas, with brushed rectangles of color orbiting the central conglomeration of shapes. In *Cape Sunium* (1992), Ippolito painted rectangular and triangular whites, yellows, blacks, and blues high on the central axis of a light fluorescent green and yellow canvas. What seems to work less well is the muddy diffusion of marks in *Alto Adige* (1994), the largest work in the show. In this painting of whites, magentas, and grays, paint marks, or traces, were made with a roller or sponge. The work lacks the formal tension and weight provided by defined shapes, while the sponged or rolled paint seems only an affectation. Similarly, the works on paper (of which there were many on view) scatter their marks with equal distribution, resulting in somewhat less powerful effects.

Despite the few humdrum moments in

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this exhibition, it offered a broad view of an artist working in the high noon of his abilities. Not much abstract painting is worth a second look today. Angelo Ippolito's radiant abstractions are.

—Daniel Kunitz

"Alfred H. Maurer:
Aestheticism to Modernism"
at Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York.
November 30, 1999–January 22, 2000

Today the painter Alfred H. Maurer (1868–1932) is known mainly to aficionados of early American modernism, a circumstance that begs the question: which Maurer do they know? He was a painter with many stylistic incarnations, never content to settle into a single manner. Hollis Taggart Galleries' remarkable and large exhibition follows the artist's course from its academic beginning to his unexplained suicide in 1932.

A lifelong innovator, Maurer was trained, ironically enough, as a commercial artist. His father, Louis Maurer, worked as a painter and lithographer for Currier and Ives. Only one work on view in this show hearkens back to Alfred's years as a graphic artist: *Figure Study* (1896), a slick, almost kitschy illustration, in watercolor and gouache, of a young woman bearing a basket of groceries down a windy street. It hung next to another *Figure Study*—an oil on canvas from four years later—which shows Maurer painting in his first mature style, one influenced primarily by Whistler and William Merritt Chase. A mix of Chase's romantic realism and Whistler's moody aestheticism, this *Study* is a full-length portrait of a dark-haired woman wearing a light, robin's-eggshell-blue dress against a ground of pale and darker yellows. Maurer painted it in Paris, where he had moved in 1897 to study at the Académie Julian, and where he continued to live until 1914, when World War I forced him to return to New York.

Maurer's early Parisian work—studies of women, people on the street or at the beach, and café scenes reminiscent of Degas—won him considerable acclaim. He exhibited successfully throughout Europe and the U.S., at times with other young up-and-comers such as his friend William Glackens, and Robert Henri and John Sloan. (Unfortunately, two of his best early canvases, *Self-Portrait* [1897] and the Whistlerian *An Arrangement* [1901], which won the Carnegie International, had to be returned to their respective museums several weeks before the Hollis Taggart show ended.) Still, the remaining works from this period attain a level of artistic achievement that would have earned Maurer a secure place in the history of American art even if he'd done nothing else. Of particular interest are *Figure of a Woman* (c. 1902), another full-length portrait, this one in profile, that again owes much to Whistler, with its three dark bands of color in the background highlighting the pink of the subject's skirt; the hauntingly somber *Seated Woman* (c. 1902–04), in which the sitter turns away from the viewer, offering only a glimpse of her face in quarter profile; and *Café Scene* (c. 1904), where daubs of red—on lips, a woman's cheek and fan, on a hat—flash out from the crowded café dance floor. But, to the delight of some and the vexation of many, Maurer did not continue in the mode that brought him so much approbation. His was a restless sensibility, always searching out new stylistic avenues.

Maurer was among the very first American artists to attend the salons of Gertrude and Leo Stein. By 1905, he was, in Gertrude's words, "an old habitué of the house." It was there that he probably made his initial contact with the work of Henri Matisse, who would become his new master. Sometime around 1907, Maurer forsook Whistlerian tonal variation for Matissean experimentation, consciously adopting the Fauve style. Indeed, he called one of the earliest and most affecting pieces in the new style *Fauve Landscape with Red and Blue* (c. 1906–07), and continued to use the word "fauve" in titles until he began ex-

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perimenting with Cubism and abstraction almost a decade later.

It seems that Maurer transformed himself into a colorist with relative ease: while not all of these landscapes and still lifes employ color in the purely expressive, jangling fashion associated with Fauvism, few strike one as hesitant or uncertain in their pictorial direction. With its decorative patterning and juxtaposition of oranges, reds, pinks, and blues, *Fauve Still Life* (c. 1908–10) could be mistaken for one of Matisse's own works. And a number of the landscapes, *Fauve Landscape* (c. 1910–11) in particular, bear a strong resemblance to the Frenchman's canvases from Collioure. It is in his portraits of this period that Maurer achieves his most stunning breakthroughs. One of the very few paintings the artist dated, *Woman with a Hat* (1907), so unlike his earlier portraits, displays a variety of expressive brushstrokes, scumbling, and dripping, while in *Head of a Woman* (c. 1908) the painter opts for a more stylized technique, deploying planes and angular lines to describe the subject's face.

In 1914, Maurer returned to New York, never to make it back to Paris, although European art continued to influence him. An engagement with Cézanne's bathers appears to lie behind the Maurer nudes of 1927–28, and as early as 1916 he took up the challenges of synthetic Cubism. Mostly still lifes, the Cubist works have Matissean elements like decorative patterns and black outlining of shapes, though the best of them make use of thickly textured paint and muted colors. In *Still Life with Doily and Roll* (c. 1928–32), Maurer put the paint-soaked imprint of a doily on a complex series of impastoed planes. Perhaps the strangest and most thoroughly original of his work in America are Maurer's paintings of girls from the mid-1920s. Vaguely reminiscent of Modigliani's women, Maurer's girls, with their full, red lips and wide, staring eyes, manage the extraordinarily difficult task of being excellent paintings while evoking an air of comedy.

The range of styles on display at Hollis Taggart reveals versions of Maurer of which even experts were unaware. The excellent catalogue and essay by Stacey Epstein will aid greatly in future studies of this artist who, to our delight, constantly challenged himself to change.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

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Architecture

Fantasy island

by Francis Morrone

"New York: A Documentary Film," which aired on the Public Broadcasting Service in five two-hour installments this past November,[1] marks the convergence of two trends. One is the growing cottage industry of the historiography of New York City. It is an industry that received impetus from the 1998 centennial of the consolidation of Greater New York, the official hoopla surrounding which prompted many an academic and commercial press to beef up its New York offerings. The second trend is the type of television documentary pioneered by the brothers Ken and Ric Burns, of which the pacesetting example was their collaborative effort of nine years ago, "The Civil War," which appeared, as do all their works, on PBS. Since "The Civil War," the brothers have gone their separate ways, though their styles are remarkably similar. Ken Burns gave us "Baseball" and a series on Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, while Ric gave us "Coney Island," "The Way West," and now "New York," many years in the making and described in every press account as "epic."

The Burnses are credited with devising a documentary format that combines the use of archival photographs, which the camera pans and zooms in on in such a way that the photos are made almost to seem like moving images; omnipresent, plaintive music; voice-over narration, with well-known actors reading from period documents; and the employment of a small army of "talking heads," often academic historians, whose words give interpretive shape to the proceedings. In "The Civil War," the premier talking head was the southern historian Shelby Foote. Some credit his gray beard and dulcet drawl as the things that made "The Civil War" one of the most popular series in public television's history. I have read that Foote so affected his viewers that he received numerous proposals of marriage.

The Shelby Foote, so to speak, of New York is Mike Wallace, professor at John Jay College and the Pulitzer Prize-winning co-author of *Gotham*, a weighty summa of left-wing interpretations of New York City's history.[2] In a review of "New York" in *The New Yorker*, Nancy Franklin remarked on Wallace's "eager-beaver, boyish curiosity about how the city works" and how "at times he seems about to leap out of his chair." My take is a little different from Franklin's. Wallace's putative enthusiasm struck me as exuberant sarcasm. There is a bullying contempt in his affectedly elongated vowels. By contrast, Professor Ken-

1 The first five episodes of "New York: A Documentary Film," directed by Ric Burns, co-written with James Sanders, were shown November 14–18, 1999. The final episode will air this coming May. A companion volume to the series has been published by Alfred A. Knopf (480 pages, $60).

2 See my review "PC New York" in *The New Criterion* (December 1998).

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neth Jackson of Columbia, who receives far less airtime than Wallace, is, with his soft, warm Tennessee accent, a joy to listen to, even as one might disagree with him. The narrator, the actor David Ogden Stiers, speaks so beautifully that I predict I will rewatch my tapes of the series for no other reason than to hear his voice. It is the skewed sense of New York's past that his voice enunciates that is problematic.

It is a remarkable past, make no mistake about it. The series is nothing less than grandly ambitious in attempting to tell the story of the city's growth in a mere twelve hours. I just wish this series had provided its viewers with a better-rounded perspective on the city's past rather than with such an ideologically selective version of it.

The principal theme of the series is the struggle to make capitalism and democracy coexist and "the heartbreaking extremes of the capitalist system and the failure of government to do anything about it." It may shock the writers of "New York" to learn that some of us think that while capitalism and democracy don't necessarily go together, neither do they necessarily conflict. And it may be time to give the word *democracy* a rest. Whenever the talking heads or narrator of "New York" really wants to say *socialism*, or *social democracy*, or even *communism* or *anarchism*, they instead say *democracy*. It is the antithesis of capitalism. The story of New York turns out to be about pitched battles in the streets between laborers and the agents of capitalists (i.e., the police), about general strikes, mass meetings, anarchist bombings, Red Scare deportations, and the like.

The highlight of the series is its lengthy treatment of the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911. Vintage photographs of young female garment workers are superimposed over images of flickering flames. In the background are the muffled sounds of chaos, of screams and shouts. Intercut with these images are the talking heads—Robert Caro, Christine Stansell, and above all Kathy Peiss, who seems to be holding back tears. The intent of the filmmakers is clear: the Triangle fire was New York's own mini-Holocaust, in which factory-owning brutes, themselves only the henchmen of demon capital, forced young girls to their grisly death.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was one of countless small to medium-sized garment factories in Manhattan in the early twentieth century. It was located in the top three floors of the ten-story Asch Building at the northwest corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, a block from Washington Square. Five hundred or so women toiled at Triangle, most of them Jewish immigrants in their late teens and early twenties. On March 23, 1911, a fire broke out in the eighth floor of the building, and spread rapidly, fueled by all the fabric on the premises. Many of the women, however, were unable to get out of the building. The bosses always kept the doors locked, partly, we are told, to keep the women at their sewing machines, partly to keep union organizers from entering the factory. In any event, 146 young women died in fewer than fifteen minutes, most of them by jumping from the building. The bodies piled on the pavement were a shocking, horrific sight that no one who saw could ever get from his mind. The fire became the cause célèbre of the labor movement, then picking up steam. ("New York" does not tell us that the Asch Building is still there. It is now the Brown Building and New York University owns it. Not one but two plaques on the outside of the building relate the story of the Triangle fire.)

No one will deny that the Triangle fire was a horrible event, one of the deadliest fires in New York's history. Were it not for the labor movement implications, however, it surely would not have warranted screen time in "New York," let along the lengthy treatment it received. The Triangle fire inspired many social-democratic reforms in New York and America. The state passed numerous workplace-safety and fire-inspection laws in the wake of the fire, following official investigations spearheaded by Al

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Smith and Robert F. Wagner. The young women who died in the Triangle fire were martyrs to the cause of a more just society—of more democracy, less capitalism.

The only problem, as John Tierney succinctly and brilliantly pointed out in his column in the Metro section of *The New York Times* on November 18—the day after the airing of episode four dominated by the Triangle fire—is that it ain't necessarily so. (*The New York Times*, by the way, treated the series, in many articles, as a major event of the fall season.) Tierney quoted what I found to be one of the most remarkable lines uttered in "New York." It is from Mike Wallace: "The problem with the garment industry is that it is thousands of small businessmen, many of them recently garment workers themselves." For today's leftists, business is bad, but small business is worst of all. To think that former garment workers owned those factories! Such entrepreneurs are guilty of what Marxists call "false consciousness." Where, I can hear Mike Wallace thinking, is their solidarity?

But wait: isn't it a bit at odds with the picture scholars such as Wallace paint of labor conditions in immigrant New York that there was economic mobility enough that a poor garment worker might one day own his own factory? Indeed it is, and that's not all. The workers who chose to work in garment factories were paid above-average wages. Immigrant garment workers' incomes were on a par with those of native-born workers and were almost unimaginably higher than they would have been back in Russia or Italy. With ever higher wages and ever increasing job mobility, before you knew it these poor laborers were no longer members of the so-called working class. In other words, the system worked exactly as the system should have worked—the only way it could have worked if so much poverty were to be erased in so short a time. And it had little if anything to do with social-welfare legislation. As the historian Moses Rischin, no standard-bearer of the right wing, put it in his classic *The Promised City*, "For many a rising immigrant family in this period of swift change, it was judged to be a ten-year trek from Hester Street to Lexington Avenue" in the relatively salubrious Yorkville district. The garment factory jobs that Mike Wallace would prefer hadn't existed were part of what fueled this "swift change" and upward mobility.

It does not bother me that the "New York" talking heads would dismiss my interpetation of these phenomena. But my view, though I think it to be true, is at the very least a plausible alternative to the "New York" view. In a series purporting to tell the history of New York, it is only right that Burns and Sanders should have attempted a more balanced account, lest the viewing public be bullied and bamboozled by Wallace and others into accepting a particular anti-capitalist interpretation. Tierney cited any number of respected academics who might have provided alternative testimony. Harvard Law School's W. Kip Viscusi, for example, points out that the OSHA-type regulations passed in the wake of the Triangle fire had very little impact on workplace safety, whereas the workers' compensation insurance system cut workplace fatalities by a third. The interesting point is that the workers' comp system was in effect—ahem—*before* the Triangle fire. One might reasonably conclude that the legislative consequences of the Triangle fire did little to improve workplace safety; that the new regulations may, by increasing employers' overhead, have slowed somewhat the pace of economic progress in America; and that the Triangle fire was, while one of the most dramatic events in New York's history, not necessarily one of the most significant.

Of course, nineteenth-century New York's considerable social strife could not be ameliorated by capitalism alone. Organized religion, not government, came to the rescue, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular its remarkable leader in New York from the 1840s to the 1860s, Archbishop John Hughes. Hughes's flock comprised the worst-off New Yorkers, the im-

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migrant Irish whose living conditions were atrocious, to say the least. "New York" makes much of how silly and patronizing it was that nativist Protestants regarded the Irish as in large measure responsible for their own wretchedness. Today's historians take the more enlightened view that the Irish were victims of a capitalist system and its handmaiden, a hypocritical bourgeois moralism. Yet Archbishop Hughes understood that until the members of his flock cleaned up their own act, and organized their lives to take advantage of the opportunities of the modern city, they would continue to live wretchedly. Crime and loose morals flourished among these Irish. Violence, degradation, and degeneracy marked mid-century Irish culture in New York.

The writers of "New York" duly note that this was so. But after a little hand-wringing over how capitalism brought this about, the Irish are dropped like a hot potato. Archbishop Hughes, the man who led his flock from degradation and paved the way for the eventual—often within a single generation—economic success of Irish New Yorkers, rates nary a mention in the series. In the book published by Alfred A. Knopf as a companion to the series, Hughes rates two mentions. There is a brief mention of Protestant outrage over Hughes's efforts to get public funding for Catholic schools. And there is also a brief mention of how city leaders prevailed upon Hughes to use his influence to quell the horrific draft riots in 1863. (The draft riots, which get a lot of airtime in "New York," were bloody riots —the worst in the city's history—in which the Irish lashed out against the fact that one could buy one's way out of the draft, an option the Irish did not have, since they were so poor. For several days, drunken mobs attacked any symbol they could find of the Union cause, targeting in particular African-Americans and African-American institutions.) As the book states, "In desperation, civic leaders implored the archbishop . . . to do something—anything—to help restore calm. But there was little Hughes, or anyone, could do."

What the book's authors fail to note is that by 1863 the archbishop's work was largely done, that the draft riots, awful though they were, were, as William J. Stern beautifully put it, "the death rattle of a destructive culture that was giving way to something constructive and edifying." For what Hughes had done was nothing less than to effect a wholesale transformation in the *moral* climate of Irish life in New York. He did this by establishing a Catholic school system that proved (and continues to prove) the most effective means of mass education for poor children. He did it by appealing to the women of the Irish community, by making the Blessed Virgin Mary the symbol of the New York church and instilling in women a powerful sense of their responsibility over the moral realm in the life of their communities. He did it by promoting abstinence from destructive drink. (The "New York" crowd would adduce as unforgivable hypocrisy that Hughes did this while he himself was no teetotaler.) Hughes built New York's Catholic cathedral, think of its architectural merit what you will (I happen to think it profoundly underrated), as a tangible measure of the Irish self-respect he did so much to promote.

Just so, the religion of Eastern European Jewish immigrants admirably served them in their social and economic adaptations at the turn of the century. Though physically they were not of particularly hardy stock and they lived in very harsh, overcrowded conditions such as the infamous Tenth Ward, these Jewish immigrants experienced very low death and disease rates, largely because of Orthodox practices including kosher dietary laws that promoted a level of cleanliness exceeding that to be found even in the upper-class sections of the city. It is furthermore a measure of the city's social mobility that the Catholic daughters of earlier Irish immigrants taught—very effectively even in overcrowded classrooms—the children of these Jewish immigrants.

The point about Hughes is that he knew what needed doing to bring order and dis-

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cipline into Irish lives and thus, among many other things, enable the poor Irish to take advantage of the opportunities that were omnipresent in the vibrant capitalist culture of New York. "New York" states more than once that its candidate for greatest New Yorker of the nineteenth century is DeWitt Clinton, philosophical heir to Alexander Hamilton and builder of the Erie Canal. There is no question of how great a leader Clinton was. Yet cannot the case be made that Hughes was, in his way, as remarkable and as important a nineteenth-century New Yorker as DeWitt Clinton? Or that the archbishop was at least in the top five? *At least worth a mention in the series*? Perhaps I should be content with the fact that neither the series nor the book mentions that icon of nineteenth-century feminism, Madame Restell, the Fifth Avenue abortionist. And perhaps I should be grateful that Mike Wallace was not asked to comment on Hughes. In his and Edwin G. Burrows's *Gotham*, Hughes is treated as little more than a power player in New York politics, a Boss Tweed in vestments; Hughes is referred to as the "self-proclaimed bishop and chief of the Irish community." There are, of course, no self-proclaimed bishops in the Catholic Church.

Of overt factual errors there are only a few in "New York." It is said that the draft riot mobs targeted Brooks Brothers on Fifth Avenue. Actually, Brooks Brothers at that time was on Broadway, at Grand Street. (We are not told the reason Brooks Brothers was targeted: the distinguished clothier supplied the Union Army's blue uniforms and was also known to be the favorite tailor of President Lincoln, who was wearing a Brooks Brothers suit the night he was shot at Ford's Theater.)

The novelist Peter Quinn, author of *Banished Children of Eve*, a historical novel about the draft riots, and one of the series's talking heads, remarks of Boss Tweed that his largely stolen personal fortune of $50 million would be multiplied by ten in today's dollars. Actually, the rate of inflation between 1875 and 1999 is not 1000 percent, but somewhere between 1400 and 1500 percent. Even so, it is an insufficient indication of the immensity of Tweed's fortune. In 1875, $50 million, if I am calculating correctly, would have been roughly one half of one percent of the estimated gross national product. One half of one percent of the gross national product today would probably be $50 or $60 billion dollars, not the half billion that Quinn calculates. (I am indebted to Michael Klepper and Robert Gunther for this method of interpreting personal fortunes from the past.) In other words, a true reading of Boss Tweed's alleged net worth at its height (he lost it all) tells us something of the almost unimaginable scale of his graft. Probably only Commodore Vanderbilt and the department store magnate A. T. Stewart (unmentioned in the series) were richer than Tweed in the 1870s.

Finally, the series keeps reminding us that New York is the greatest city in the world. It is a very silly thing to say, whether true or not. One wonders, though, if by definition a city can be great, let alone the greatest, if its citizens and boosters constantly say how great it is. Isn't it a part of being great that you have the forbearance and self-restraint not to say how great you are? Alas, modesty has never been New York's strong suit. A New York journalist once dubbed Chicago the "Windy City," not because of its climate (it is not in fact among the windiest cities in America), but because of Chicagoans' boastfulness about their city—i.e., they are full of wind. New York, actually, is the windiest of the world's great cities.

Still, it begs the question: *Is* New York the world's greatest city? I would say that it is certainly the great city of the twentieth century, though so much of what has made it so comes out of two of the century's ten decades: the 1920s and the 1930s. The series, in episode five, makes great hay of the Twenties. It is without question the most appealing of the series's episodes. Mike Wallace is given a rest and instead Ann Douglas, Margo Jefferson, and Carol Willis

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take to the screen to declaim, with enormous enthusiasm and not a whit of sarcasm, of New York in the Roaring Twenties. Indeed, the architectural historian Carol Willis moved me when she said that the Empire State Building (about which she is the leading expert) is her favorite building in the whole world. As a television moment, it put to shame Mike Wallace's "eager-beaver, boyish curiosity."

About the next decade, the Thirties, however, we will have to wait until May for the series's treatment. In the companion book, Robert Moses dominates the section on the Thirties, though there is also the standard material on bread lines, soup kitchens, Hoovervilles, and the New Deal. The Thirties were culturally protean, a fact often lost in politicized accounts of the Depression. It also bears pointing out that many of what we are accustomed to think are the most characteristic products of Twenties culture actually date from the Thirties. The Empire State Building was completed in 1931, Rockefeller Center went up between 1931 and 1939, Cole Porter's *Gay Divorce* (containing "Night and Day") opened at the Barrymore Theater in 1932 and *Anything Goes* at the Alvin Theater in 1934, George and Ira Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* opened at the Music Box Theater in 1931, and so on. The greatest decade of the American popular song, and probably the era of New York's greatest prestige throughout the rest of America, was the 1930s, not the 1920s. In the 1930s a New Yorker, the patrician Franklin Roosevelt, exerted a broad national appeal. In the 1920s a New Yorker, Al Smith, a son of the Lower East Side, found the heartland daunting. In the 1930s the vision of Manhattan urbanity claimed a large part of the national psyche, as we see in song and movie. That these songs and movies resonate with us still is a sign for hope in the age of MTV.

In industrial prowess and financial clout, and certainly as the great repository of the world's art and artifacts, New York in the twentieth century probably has no peer. Architecturally and urbanistically, the situation is different. Jane Jacobs once famously said that a city couldn't be a work of art. Lewis Mumford responded that the citizens of Siena, Florence, Venice, and Turin should please take note. It was Jacobs, however, who acutely diagnosed the aesthetic failings of Manhattan streets: those long, droopy crosstown blocks, their endless rows of boxy cages "like the windrows of Theodore Roosevelt's teeth," as the historian John Lukacs once put it. These blocks, whatever the decorative niceties of their façades, looked old and run-down soon after they were built, and impart to New York today a preternaturally wearied countenance that great European cities, older than New York by centuries and even millennia, do not possess. (No writer has ever truly captured this weary face of New York.) It is in part the legacy of the "Great Mistake," the commissioners' gridiron street plan of 1807–11, which talking head Phillip Lopate praises for its democratic quality. Yet Wall Street and Greenwich Village, the most attractive parts of Manhattan, are so in large part because they are off the grid. (The oppressively regular fenestration of so many Manhattan streets is the vertical projection of the horizontal grid.) Even for those who like grids (I don't), the commissioners botched the job. The crosstown blocks are deadly. The lack of rear alleys means that garbage will always be piled high on our curbs. If New York is so great, then why am I often embarrassed to show it to my friends from other places?

At least the New York I show my friends is a real place, unlike the fantasy world conjured by historians such as the talking heads of "New York." Conservative and moderate historians have stayed away from urban history because its amorphous nature renders its data too easily manipulable for political ends. Yet if New York is to serve the twenty-first century, as it served the twentieth, as a symbol of American aspirations, someone will have to come along soon to tell its story soberly and truthfully, without the ideological prostrations of the writers and talking heads of "New York: A Documentary Film."

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Music

The great ghastly

by David Mermelstein

The Metropolitan Opera has long been lucky in many ways, but it has never enjoyed much success with world premieres. Excepting two Puccini efforts (*La Fanciulla del West* and *Il Tritico*), a pair of Barber operas (*Vanessa* and the undervalued *Antony and Cleopatra*), and Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (which has only recently found favor), the Met has a dismal record in putting its considerable reputation behind new works. Does anyone remember *Cyrano* or *The Canterbury Pilgrims* or *The Man Without a Country*? And what about *Madeleine*, *The Warrior*, or *The Robin Woman: Shanewis*? The list goes on. Perhaps that's why, until the present decade, the company stopped presenting new works after it relocated to Lincoln Center. But as this country's leading opera house, the Met has doubtless felt pressure to serve as more than a repository of tried and true repertory, and so ten years ago it once more began commissioning fresh material. The first of these efforts was John Corigliano's rhetorical *Ghosts of Versailles*, a turgid work that had its debut in 1991. A year later, the Met veered in the opposite direction, giving audiences Philip Glass's *The Voyage*, a preternaturally chilly piece written to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America. Now, in the Met's latest attempt at expanding the operatic canon, we have *The Great Gatsby*, John Harbison's arguably noble but shockingly misguided attempt to distill F. Scott Fitzgerald's grandly poetic and hopelessly dyspeptic novel of the Jazz Age.[1]

That Harbison should choose *Gatsby* as his vehicle is at once understandable and unfortunate. The work's renown makes it intrinsically appealing. It could hardly have escaped either Harbison's or the Met's notice that an operatic transformation of *Gatsby* guaranteed both increased public recognition and more than usual interest from the press. (A fawning profile of Harbison by Charles McGrath, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, appeared in the *Times* Sunday magazine shortly before the premiere, for instance.) But the novel's familiarity meant that expectations were running even higher than usual for such an endeavor. Still, it was not preordained that Harbison's *Gatsby* would fail. Indeed, there was every possibility that the opera might succeed. In myriad internal monologues, Fitzgerald provided the raw materials for soaring arias. And there is, of course, the sheer lyricism of the author's language, brilliant and evocative even by the high standards of pre-World War II American fiction. But Fitzgerald's novel is neither linear nor well-plotted nor even especially logical. And, in his acid-etched prose, Fitzgerald implodes the very romantic ideals modern audiences generally associate with successful opera. Still, with Fitzgerald's inspiration,

1 *The Great Gatsby*, by John Harbison, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera on December 20, 1999.

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Harbison might have fashioned a powerful work for our ironic, cynical age. That he did not is as much a testament to his own failures as an operatic composer as to the difficulties inherent in transforming *Gatsby*.

Most disconcerting was Harbison's inexplicable decision not to turn Fitzgerald's fecund monologues into arias. Rather, the composer, serving as his own librettist, literalized everything, leaching the poetry from the prose and turning the narrator Nick Carraway's oddly sentimental journey into something routine and dull. Audiences are robbed of the process of discovery that is among the chief pleasures of Fitzgerald's novel. Perhaps Harbison thought he was making things clearer with this direct approach, but the result is a work bereft of nuance and texture, lacking the very virtues for which *Gatsby* is so often praised. There's an old saw that any man who serves as his own lawyer has a fool for a client. Something similar, pace Wagner, can be said of a composer who selects himself as librettist.

Musically, too, Harbison fails his audience. The opera starts promisingly enough, with an easy-on-the-ears overture filled with glittering chords. Dissonance vies with whispers of 1920s pop tunes (fox trots, etc.), a gimmick Harbison returns to, and greatly expands on throughout *Gatsby*. But if the overture subtly suggests an old-fashioned Broadway curtain raiser, the bulk of Harbison's music is not nearly so engaging. Remote and academic, the vaguely cinematic score is rife with the short, sharp, utterly conventional brass-and-percussion phrases characteristic of myriad recent orchestral works. It captures the alienation that figures in Fitzgerald's novel without evoking the book's wistful spirit. In a bald aping of Britten, Harbison has inserted eight orchestral interludes. Unfortunately, these non-vocal passages do nothing more than mark time, allowing for set changes and such, and are unlikely to have a future life in the concert hall, as do five of the six interludes from Britten's *Peter Grimes*.

A good deal has been made of the ersatz period pop tunes Harbison crafted for the opera to conjure the era's boisterousness; yet these interpolations, intended by Harbison not to distract from his larger musical canvas, seem utterly at odds with nearly everything else in the score. Indeed, these catchy songs, complete with lyrics by Murray Horwitz, prove among the opera's highlights, outstripping Harbison's more serious musical efforts in interest and appeal; the songs should be mere window dressing, lighthearted counterpoint to the serious arias. But though Harbison writes easily for the voice, never straining his singers, his indistinct word-painting refuses to linger in the memory. As with André Previn's operatic treatment of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which had its premiere in San Francisco last season, Harbison's score mostly fails to observe the traditional distinction between recitative and aria. The result is musical mush, in which too little contrast is drawn between the opera's most tender moments and its banal stage business.

The Met nonetheless engaged a cast of formidable singers for *Gatsby*. In the pivotal role of Daisy, the soprano Dawn Upshaw made a surprisingly good impression. One might have thought Upshaw too wholesome for the role, yet she revealed a vapid side that ideally suited this production. She sang with her typical freeness, lending Harbison's empty strains sympathy, if not gravity. Upshaw found a fine foil in the mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, whose Jordan Baker lent the opera a much needed sardonic quality. And Graham's bittersweet-chocolate vocalism enhanced her underwritten role. But if Upshaw and Graham made the most of meager material, the soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson (in her Met debut, no less) was thoroughly wasted as Myrtle Wilson, the gas-station floozy enamored with Daisy's husband, Tom. Hunt's rich, coruscating voice made lazy circles in her high register, but nothing in Harbison's score fully revealed her gifts, which are considerable. As Nick Carraway, the opera's putative protagonist, the baritone Dwayne Croft looked good and sang well,

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but his dark timbre was all wrong for the role, which should have been written for a tenor. Several lesser roles were particularly well-cast. The tenor Mark Baker made an aptly bluff impression as Tom, and the bass-baritone William Powers managed an oily Meyer Wolfsheim that steered clear of stereotype. Richard Paul Fink, an excellent baritone, displayed both a lovely purr and a hearty ringing tone as Tom Wilson, the sorrowful cuckold. He was by far the most emotive member of the cast, and his reaction to Myrtle's death represented the opera's one truly chilling moment.

All of which brings us to the eponymous Gatsby. And here it's hard to say to whom the greater disservice has been done: to the tenor Jerry Hadley, saddled with a thankless leading role, or to Harbison, who saw his opera's main character personified by a frequently coarse singer whose indifferent approach further drained it of import and impact. There seems little reason to belabor the point. The part was ill-conceived for a tenor to begin with; Gatsby begs for life as a baritone. But if one must cast a tenor, then why use an artist whose strong suit is naive charm? Hadley's allure for the most part escapes me, but he's at his best in parts like Nemorino and Tom Rakewell in which innocence and even crudeness enhance characterization. The role of Gatsby is far too affectedly polished for Hadley, whose vocal shortcomings failed to lend it appropriate gloss anyway.

As for the playing in the pit, Harbison could hardly have found a better proponent for his score than James Levine, who conducted the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra to a fare-thee-well, summoning up not just accuracy in his players, but also enthusiasm—no mean feat in a score filled with redundancies. (The opera was in fact commissioned by the Met to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Levine's debut with the company, but surely he deserves greater thanks than this.) The glorious sounds that emanated from beneath the stage once more proved the versatility of Levine and his players, who are sounding ever more like a self-standing symphony orchestra. The percussionists, especially, found a showcase on this occasion.

Mark Lamos's production seemed restrained in the cavernous Met auditorium, despite the occasional presence of a great many supernumeraries. His staging was always elegant and at times even beautiful. Various small touches enhanced the general scene, as when Graham unselfconsciously used an umbrella to take a mock golf swing. Michael Yeargan's set captured the Art Deco scene more than adequately, and various details, like the Chinese lanterns at Gatsby's parties, lent intimacy and verisimilitude to his efforts. Scrims, rather than actual sets, conjured the Valley of Ashes, an intelligent choice given the limits inherent in opera. Happily, Jane Greenwood's costumes complemented Yeargan's work. They were generally pale, almost pastel, eye-catching but never gaudy. Duane Schuler's lighting also enhanced matters. Particularly well executed was the ever-changing sky backdrop, which went from day to night most believably.

The failure of *Gatsby* should not dissuade the Met from commissioning new operas. Its mission ought to include both the warm embrace of former triumphs and the challenge of broadening the canon. But for new works to succeed, reasonable precautions need to be taken. Lavishing great funds on a composer whose track record in opera is dubious is risky, allowing him to work without a seasoned collaborator, foolhardy. Whether or not Fitzgerald's novel should have been the subject of an operatic treatment can be endlessly debated. What's clear is that Harbison's effort only furthered the case of those who insist that good literature rarely makes good opera. There's no shortage of opera-worthy material in this world—be it newspaper stories or largely forgotten plays, poems, and novels. The Met, and other opera companies as well, should seek out these sources, cultivate worthy composers and librettists, and give audiences the grand spectacle for which they are so clearly clamoring.

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A tale of two prodigies

by Jay Nordlinger

As fate had it, the violinists Joshua Bell and Anne-Sophie Mutter gave recitals in New York on consecutive January nights.[1] As fate has also had it, they are about the same age (Bell is thirty-two, Mutter thirty-six), they were famous as teenagers, and they have large and enthusiastic followings. They seem destined to be compared, or at least jointly discussed.

For most of their careers, Mutter has had the greater reputation. A German, she was taken up by the late conductor Herbert von Karajan, who engaged her at the Salzburg Festival when she was thirteen. Bell is a Hoosier, who grew up in Bloomington and studied with Josef Gingold, the late, well-loved violinist and pedagogue. Bell made his initial splash when he played with the Philadelphia Orchestra at fourteen. If Mutter was ever the more mature and impressive violinist, Bell has more than caught up. In a small crowd of excellent violinists under forty, Bell, with every passing year, stands out—although Mutter is hardly back in the shadows.

Bell gave his recital at Alice Tully Hall, with the pianist Frederic Chiu, an American of Chinese parentage who has made his mark with a recording of the complete works for piano of Prokofiev. They began with Copland's Sonata for Violin and Piano, a lovely and engaging work that represents the composer in a relaxed and thoughtful pose. Bell instantly had the attention of his audience, with confident and authoritative playing. One could be at ease in one's seat with him—there would not be errors or interpretive foolishness. His intonation was secure. He played simply, straightforwardly, with a modesty that becomes this sort of music, and, really, all music. The demand here is to allow the score to be transparent, which Bell did. The Coplandian intervals —stamped on the work like a signature— were clear and unforced. This was alert and rhythmically intelligent playing, with the violinist respecting the notes on the page and taking no undue liberties—one could easily have transcribed the piece from this performance.

At the beginning of the Lento movement came single strokes, perfectly inflected. Here, too, Bell was refreshingly simple ('tis a gift to be). Never was there a hint of excess or affectation. The final Allegretto was sprightly and well articulated. Bell—in another mark of the judicious musician—knows which notes are to be accented and which are not. His forte playing was bracing and resolute, with some warmth in it, but still bright, not soppy. Bell's tone is, in fact, admirably adaptable, as in the best string playing. It can be crystalline or buttery—his choice, or, rather, the music's. He always seems to do what he should, offering this color or that, giving more vibrato or

1 Joshua Bell appeared at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, on January 9; Anne-Sophie Mutter appeared at Carnegie Hall on January 10.

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less, as the situation dictates. He is also a good manager of music, and might—for this and other reasons—make a fine conductor, if he so chose.

The second work on the program was another twentieth-century sonata, of a starkly different character—Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1 in F Minor. Bell's account of it was etched with modernist precision. Beauty is not necessarily the point in this music, as Bell well knows. He also knows that Prokofiev requires a measure of coldness, and a martial feeling, and some mystery, and even a bit of insanity. His playing was severe and angular, in the Russian style. Indeed, he was as Russian in his Prokofiev as he was American in his Copland. His "off-the-bow" runs were gossamer, yet true and distinguishable. Of any rhythmic complexity, he was, again, the master. In the Andante, Bell achieved an astonishing, muted beauty; his playing was otherworldly, nimble, and aware. His trills were fluttering or taut, snarling or spooky; his pianos were ghostly. It seems that nothing is beyond his ability to convey. Though his technique is not flashy or ostentatious, he always seems to have enough.

After intermission came Bartók's First Rhapsody for Violin and Piano ("Folk Dances"), a work that is usually played with orchestra but was done here in its original form. There is, of course, a touch of the gypsy in every violinist, and Bell has a healthy dose of it. In this appealing piece, he provided a nice contrast between the raucous and the sweet. Simplicity, once more, served him well, with not a note or a dynamic wasted. There is dance in his bow. He can sing blithely, and he can tear up the strings with virtuosity.

To end the program was the Ravel sonata, the least frequently heard of the great and beloved French sonatas (the others being the Fauré, the Debussy, and the Franck—and let there be no complaining that Franck was, in fact, a Belgian). Here, Bell was pure and correct, producing a sublime *cantabile*. It takes technique to put an audience in impressionistic dreamland, and this he did—but with a hidden technique, devoid of artifice, enabling honesty of expression. The final movement, Perpetuum mobile, was infused with a constant (well, perpetual) energy, and Bell's loose (read: relaxed and supple) technique resulted in a thrillingly tight performance—one of the great paradoxes of musical technique.

Bell, who enjoyed superb training, has the unteachable: musical judgment, taste. The repertory of the violin is vast, and he can play all of it, with no specialty or deficiency. He recalls a violinist of a past generation, Zino Francescatti, the impeccable Frenchman with the lilting Italian name. Bell, like him, is something better than a violinist: He is a musician. He is also one of the most underrated performers, critically, before the public today, a condition that can hardly last forever.

The following night, it was Mutter's turn. She was in town for a month-long "residency," as concert organizations have taken to calling such extended stays, including six performances with the New York Philharmonic and two recitals in Carnegie Hall, of which this was the first. Accompanying her was the pianist Lambert Orkis, an amiable American known for his puckish comments from the stage and his advocacy of contemporary music. They began with Webern's Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, written in 1910, but seeming as modern and radical as anything composed this morning. Mutter, too, is proud to be a champion of new music, and the works commissioned by or for her come fast and furiously.

In the Webern, Mutter showed that she deserves her reputation as a skillful proponent of the modern. Her tone was well adapted to the music—wan, disembodied, bleak. Webern sought to be as spare as possible in his writing, and Mutter's playing reflected that spirit. She has an obvious affinity for this music, which helps to bring others along, even when they may be reluctant. In the first minutes of her recital, she succeeded in creating a distinctive and unusual atmosphere—an achievement.

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The Respighi violin sonata lies outside the major repertory, and not without reason: blowzy with romantic effusions, it is not especially distinguished. Mutter employed her characteristic sound, which is pleasant, thin-ribboned, and slightly watery. She achieved some ethereal pianissimos. But, as is often the case with her, this was competent playing that did not rise to the remarkable or memorable. She failed to lend to the piece much character, which was perhaps not entirely her fault. The sonata is episodic, overwrought, and melodramatic. It may be thought of as Liszt for the violin—full of bombast, albeit pretty-sounding at times. Respighi even ends with a tremolo for the piano, as if in tribute to Liszt, the king of the tremolo and other vulgar musical gestures.

The second half of the program opened with a work by George Crumb, his *Four Nocturnes for Violin and Piano (Night Music II)* (Crumb is a big one for dual titles). Orkis made an appeal from the stage before the two began the piece, begging for silence from an audience that had shaken the roof with its coughing. This is—Orkis was not wrong to beseech—a quiet and disquieting work, tranquil and jarring. It involves the typical Crumbian tricks: The pianist leans into the belly of his instrument, plucking and strumming the strings; the violinist also plucks and strums, in addition to hitting and rubbing. The duo performed this work with utmost respect and not a little effectiveness, and the composer—robust and beaming—was on hand to receive his share of applause.

Mutter, like Bell, waded into Bartók, although that composer's Violin Sonata No. 2, forbidding and cerebral, bears little resemblance to the friendly Rhapsody. Mutter acquitted herself well, giving the sonata a drive, an inexorability. Like her counterpart from Indiana, she has good rhythmic sense, and ample technique. Yet she is sometimes guilty of dull playing, even if it is otherwise unobjectionable. It is hard to fault her specifically—she is an able violinist by any fair standard—but one often finds oneself hoping that she will catch a gust of inspiration.

Last on the printed program was Ravel's popular *Tzigane* (meaning "gypsy"), which Mutter lit into at an unusually fast clip. On the whole, she was commanding, if a bit wobbly in spots. She produced a pleasingly rough sound; she put just the right amount of throb in her vibrato (she, too, has gypsy in her hands); her octaves were clean and well weighted. But, in contrast to Bell, one could not entirely relax with her, trusting that all would be well: One had to look out for bumps, dips, and hiccups. Mutter lost refinement in the upper register, and she was occasionally pinched, lacking flexibility and freedom. She managed to complete her task, as she always does, but it seems more an effort than is perhaps desirable. She is a capable violinist, and even an excellent one, but she is not—not yet, at least—a transcendent, enthralling one. She survives a performance, when an immortal would triumph or transform in it. Her sole encore was more Ravel, the *Habanera*, which she dispatched limply and indifferently.

We are, let us rejoice, rich in violinists, even in quite young ones. There is Maxim Vengerov (age twenty-five), Gil Shaham (twenty-eight), Midori (one name, please, and she is twenty-seven), and the bedazzling Hilary Hahn, who at only nineteen is already a deeply satisfying violinist. In this group, Joshua Bell and Anne-Sophie Mutter seem senior statesmen. They will presumably continue to grow in wisdom and ability. But they have already accomplished, in their twenty-year careers, a fair amount—and this is especially true of the relatively unsung one from the great Midwest.

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The media

Against linguistic libertarianism

by James Bowman

Opening my *Washington Post* to the op-ed page one day early in the new year, my eye fell on the opening sentence of David Ignatius's column: "Sailing smoothly into this first week of the 21st century, it's hard to see storm clouds on the horizon." Did my eye open the paper as well as "fall"? Did the impersonal "it" do the smooth sailing for Mr. Ignatius? No in both cases. Is there any danger of your misunderstanding either my meaning or his as a result of what American high school pupils were once taught to call a "dangling participle"? Also no. So then, does this alleged mistake really matter? Nowadays, either of the two possible answers to that question is likely to follow "Of course . . ."

Talk about your culture wars! I belong to the "Of-course-it-does" faction, and so to the "Of-course-it-doesn't"s I am a troglodyte and a reactionary, someone who would have us all speaking Latin and lording it over our social inferiors who are, in the words of a once-common newspaper advertisement, "shamed by mistakes in grammar." Newspapers themselves have been for the last twenty or thirty years theoretical "Doesn't"s and practical "Does"es. If they have managed not to be shamed by mistakes in grammar very often up until now, it is largely because there has been an ample supply of copy editors who went to school back in the days when "English" class routinely included tuition in grammar. As these people retire, we are likely to see more and more errors of the kind I found in Mr. Ignatius's column.

Computer spell-checkers can stem the tide of error in one respect, but grammar-checkers are in their infancy and often ill-programmed—the very definition of the computer motto, "Garbage in, garbage out." And it will be a long time after basic grammar can be got right before the most common sorts of mistakes, namely the misuse of words, can be caught in the new and improved digital grammar-net. Wouldn't, for instance, artificial intelligence have to approach the point of self-consciousness before it could correct this sentence from another of Mr. Ignatius's columns, on trading stocks on line: "That turns out to be a hot issue these days, thanks to our peripatetic friend the Internet"? One can scarcely even imagine what Ignatius thought he meant. Ubiquitous? At any rate, the Internet is many things, but one thing it is certainly not is peripatetic—i.e., walking about. By the time some automated cyber-grammarian is smart enough to catch that one, it might well *be* peripatetic. But then, of course, it could hardly continue to be a "net" or part of a net, "Inter-" or otherwise, since nets, by definition, do not walk about. Either a new metaphor will have to be found to describe "our friend" or mixed metaphors will have to join dangling participles among the things technology no longer allows us to care about.

Historically, one reason that newspapers have been on the side of the "Does"es and

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have taken faults of grammar and spelling very seriously has been that their economic interest is obviously bound up with the existence of a literate reading public which can communicate in a standard dialect. The very existence of a standard dialect depends on ideas of correctness and error that seem to make the post-1960s generation nervous, but without them the *Post* would have to publish a separate edition in what we have lately been taught to call "Ebonics"—hardly an economic proposition.

More and more, however, the culture of the *Post*, like that of the journalistic profession in general, is dominated by what has come to be called (I think erroneously) the "liberal" view of society, which tends to be sympathetic towards claims of linguistic (and other kinds of) independence. I wonder if this could be the reason for some of the errors that I have collected from recent editions of the *Post* and *The New York Times*, both papers which have traditionally high standards of copy editing. They are obviously not typos or spelling errors:

- A *Post* "Metro" section piece by Steve Vogel on the origin of "Taps" begins like this: "The baleful strains of taps echoed across sunlit Arlington National Cemetary yesterday, as they have many thousands of times before." *Baleful*? Presumably he means "doleful" or "mournful," since "baleful" carries with it connotations of malevolence or vindictiveness.
- Jim Hoagland on the *Post*'s op-ed page wrote that "The Russian president preemptorily installed Stepashin as his prime minister," when what he meant was *per*emptorily. *Pre*-empting, what happens to your favorite television show, does not have an adverbial form.
- Rob Fixmer in *The New York Times*, reviewing Microsoft Office 2000, first dangles a participle—"Looking at the software strictly from a user's standpoint, the change is definitely for the better"—and then, in the next sentence, dangles an adverbial phrase: "After four months of playing with Office 2000, it's clear that not only is it an improvement, but it makes excellent use of Microsoft's integration of its Web browser into the Windows 98 operating system."
- Dave Sheinin in the *Post* writes of a young pitcher with the Baltimore Orioles, Sidney Ponson, that he "pitched perhaps his best game of the season" at Atlanta, "further establishing himself as the Orioles' ersatz number two starter." Ersatz? Is he perhaps dried and reconstituted or made out of synthetic parts? Again, it is hard to imagine what Sheinin thought he meant.
- Alex Kuczynski in the *Times* on a reception to celebrate Kurt Andersen's new novel, *Turn of the Century*, has Andersen standing at the reception "in a shambling blue blazer." To "shamble" is to walk awkwardly, which blazers cannot do. Indeed, they cannot even walk gracefully. Perhaps he intends to say that the blazer is a shambles—i.e., a butchery or abattoir—which seems rather an excessive word if he only means that it is tattered and torn or perhaps too large. In any case, the blazer is not "shambling."
- Sharon R. King, in the *Times* in a Business section piece, writes: "When Tony Shellman steps outside the midtown Manhattan offices of Enyce, a small clothing designer, he never knows what his trend-spotting antennae will hone in on." "Hone in" is an increasingly common mistake for "home in," but not one, I fancy, which we would have expected to get past a *New York Times* editor until recently.
- Adam Nagourney writes in the *Times* that "Mr. Giuliani has expounded from a City Hall lectern about why he has not tried marijuana or cocaine." *Expounded about* is not idiomatic English and even *expounded* on its own would make little sense. You *expound* a text; you *explain* why you haven't tried marijuana or cocaine.
- Richard Bernstein, in a review in the *Times* of *The Great Shame and the*

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Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World by Thomas Keneally, writes that the nineteenth-century revolutionary group Young Ireland was known as such "to distinguish them from the older, more cautious politicians who militated for repeal of the 1800 Act of Union between Britain and Ireland." The word "militated" is always used impersonally ("circumstances militated against their reunion") and cannot be appropriated as a mere synonym for "agitated."

- Sally Quinn, in an open letter to Al Gore in the *Post*, wrote: "A mutual friend of ours—a longtime Washington observer—remarked of you the other day that when a person gets that close to power and has seen the enormity of it he will do anything to get and keep it." Wilson Follett announced that the battle over "mutual friend" was lost thirty-five years ago, but I wonder whether, if the rearguard had fought on a little longer, we might have also delayed the progress of "enormity" (i.e. a great crime) to mean "immensity" or "hugeness," which has now crept into the dictionaries as an informal meaning of the word.
- Linton Weeks in the *Post*'s "Book World" writes that "Publishers are enamored of battery-powered thingamajigs like the Rocket eBook and the SoftBook Reader, because they can continue to control the distribution of their books and because electronic delivery is infinitesimally simpler and cheaper than the traditional printing and delivery processes." By using "infinitesimally" (to a very small degree) for "infinitely" (to a very large degree), he has managed to say the opposite of what he means.

There is no point in counting "Who to believe?" found in a *Post* "Style" section headline, since it is quite likely, these days, to be an act of deliberate defiance. Because "whom" not only involves ideas of correctness in speech but also is seen as a quasi-Latinate accusative form which has otherwise died out of English, it is, like unsplit infinitives or sentences which avoid prepositional endings, a favorite whipping boy of those who refer dismissively to "normative grammar" (as if any grammar were not normative). Moreover, because many people misuse it through mere ignorance, it is thought to be elitist if not positively snobbish to insist on "whom." The editors at the *Post* may not yet be so ignorant that they don't *know* that "whom" is correct, but they want to claim the right to insist that it should not be.

In the same way, one wonders whether the common mistake of using "due to" instead of "because of" is not deliberately flaunted in Thomas Bass's review of Michael Crichton's *Timeline* in the *Wall Street Journal*: "Due to the bugs in ITC's quantum time capsules, Prof. Johnston . . . gets in trouble." The question that might have confronted the editor of Bernard Weinraub's piece on the Fox TV show "Action" in *The New York Times* last summer was whether or not silently to correct the grammar of the TV producer who is quoted as having said: "Between Joel and I, we had experienced a great deal." But in the context of present-day editing standards, readers can hardly be confident that the editor, or Mr. Weinraub, or most of those who would read the piece would even know that there was a grammatical mistake.

And then there are the vogue-words like "issue" and "driven" whose misuse is so widespread that they no longer give rise even to vague feelings of guilt, though separately or together (in an "issue-driven" campaign, for example) they almost invariably produce metaphorical train-wrecks. Not long ago in the *Post*, I read the following sentence: "The growth in nuclear energy production capacity has slowed in the past few years, driven in part by popular pressure over disposal of nuclear waste." This usage shows how close the verbal adjective "driven" has become to an absolute construction, independent of the grammar around it. But can it also be metaphorically independent? Is it possible that there is no more any idea of "driving" in "driven"?

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That seems the only conclusion from its use here to describe the slowing of growth—not something that we could drive, presumably, even if we knew how.

As if by way of proleptic justification, perhaps, for any future decline in its standard of editing, the *Post* has taken to providing—appropriately, on its comics pages—a syndicated column of grammatical happy-talk by someone called Chris Redgate, whose daily hundred words have for me the irresistible fascination of a five-car pile-up on the Beltway. Not only are the questions Redgate purports to answer transparently bogus, but the tone in which he answers them is, to those of us whom he would call "prescriptivists," like fingernails on the chalk board. "Would you tell people something interesting about Jane Austen?"—as, we are asked to believe, a reader writes. "Sure," Redgate's answer begins: "Jane Austen partied in an English beach town now called Lyme Regis . . ."

For someone who writes about language not, apparently, to know that although people in Regency England may have given or gone to parties, no one until the mid-twentieth century ever "partied," is a typical failure of imagination of the modern journalistic style, a vulgar and philistine attempt to colonize the past with our words, and thus our mental habits and predispositions, while dismissing theirs as simply superseded. In the same way, Redgate says that the New Globe Theatre in London "is a very accurate re-creation of the original, complete with a thatched roof and a mosh pit where the groundlings stand."

He obviously thinks this kind of thing is funny and light-hearted, just as the evil Disney Corporation thinks it funny to make Hercules or Aladdin or Pocahontas or others from among the heroes of myth, legend, history, and literature into displaced versions of spoilt Californian teenagers. Both are really showing a contempt for the past that is of a piece with Redgate's latitudinarian attitude to grammar. What we do *now* is all that counts—which means that we are placed at the mercy of fashion and will soon be as incapable of reading the literature of the past as Redgate is. Thus does he answer the question, "Does usage really dictate correctness?":

> Yes. It has been that way since before English existed, for more than two millennia. That's right, more than 2,000 years. It was even true of Latin. "Multa renascentur quae iam cecidere, cadentque/ Quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,/ Quem penes arbitrium est it ius et norma loquendi." Redgate's unapproved, very loose translation: "Many words that are now considered bummers will make a comeback, and those that people dig today will drop out if Mr. Usage says so because you play with his ball, on his field, and with his rules." From *Ars Poetica*, written by Horace, circa 20 BC.

The jocular mistranslations here—*Quis est* bummer?—help to conceal a much more serious intellectual sloppiness in retrospectively enlisting Horace as a founding member of what Redgate calls the "descriptivist" cause. The implicit logic here goes as follows: Horace said that the meanings of words change over time. This is also what we descriptivists say. Therefore, Horace was a descriptivist. Q.E.D.

But no one denies that the meanings of words change over time. The question at issue ("Does usage really dictate correctness?") is whether or not at any given moment there are correct and incorrect meanings of words. Or does *any* usage dictate correctness? If so, it can hardly mean anything to use the word "correctness" at all. Illogical as must be the latter definition (another word that thereby loses its meaning) of "descriptivism," it appears to be the one that Redgate believes in—though of course it cannot be "correct." Here, for instance, is the example he uses to illustrate the difference between denotation and connotation:

> *Mother* can denote any woman who gives birth to a child. However, the connotations of

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the word can extend far beyond that to include your personal experiences with your mother. After all, as my mother used to say, 'Everybody has one.' Of course, I've had my doubts about that, but that's part of one of my connotations for *mother*.

My connotations? Redgate is confusing "connotations," which are part of the public property of a word, the legacy of its use over many years or even centuries, with the merely private associations it may have in the mind of any individual. It is a perfectly solipsistic understanding of semantics which goes naturally with his libertarian understanding of grammar. But, carried to its logical conclusion, which would make everyone his own standard of correctness, it foreshadows the breakdown of the communicative properties of language altogether.

Here is how Redgate answers the alleged question, "Isn't the term *descriptive grammarian* an oxymoron?" in two daily parts as follows:

> Not at all. Prescriptive grammarians focus on right and wrong, good and bad. This is what the public is used to, so this is what most grammar books give them. In fact, many books show sample sentences introduced by the words *Right* and *Wrong*. This gives students the misguided notion that there's always an easy and ultimately correct answer to any grammatical issue, if they could only figure out what it is. Of course, this isn't true. But this system is much easier to teach and learn. So, many people teach and learn it. Descriptive grammarians (like me) take a very different approach.
>
> Descriptive grammarians (like Quirk) explain grammatical relationships without those kinds of moral judgments. Value judgments are not ignored, but they are usually presented as just that. Prescriptivists mislabel this approach "anything goes." On the contrary, this method requires extra effort from both teachers and students. Teachers must explain completely, not just prescribe. And students must think, not simply memorize quick fixes (that they often soon forget). Because of the extra work, descriptivist students end up with a truer and more complete understanding of the English language.

An understanding, for instance, like his of the word "connotation"? This is a deeply stupid and dishonest characterization of the difference between those who wish to preserve many of the old standards of correctness as conducive to precision of meaning and those who wish to do away with them because they are old-fashioned. But it is probably accurate, alas, in its underlying assumption that the difference has become, like so many other things these days, politicized.

It goes without saying that the vanguard of the descriptivist party is to be found in academia, though in fact the claims on behalf of the equality of all dialects—and, therefore, on behalf of the de-"privileging" of standard English—go back a long way. Readers with long memories may recall that a central premise of the movie *The Affairs of Dobie Gillis* (1953), based on a story by Max Shulman, was that the sour old Professor Amos Pomfritt, played by Hans Conried, was converted to "descriptivism" by the frankly and unashamedly brainless charm of Dobie Gillis (Bobby Van), who didn't see why it shouldn't be okay for people to write the way that people like him talked. Still today it is common to read, on a slow news day, that some real-life professor or other has made the same liberating discovery that Professor Pomfritt made.

For example, around the same time that Mr. Ignatius was dangling his participle in the *Washington Post*, the *Post*'s rival paper, the feistily conservative *Washington Times*, announced that one Kirk Hazen, a professor of linguistics and head of the West Virginia Dialect Project at West Virginia University, was the latest to announce that "no one dialect is superior to another." Standard English—the dialect for which all the familiar rules were written—being thus in no way inherently superior to West Vir-

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ginian English, it becomes possible to say that "'I ain't got none' means the same thing as 'I haven't got any.'" Hazen was backed up by an associate professor of English at George Washington University, a Daniel Moshenberg, who was quoted as saying that "To start judging a people's intelligence by the way they speak is incorrect."

That's an odd word to use, you might have thought, by one who begins by anathematizing any principle of correctness. But Hazen's example is mistaken. In fact, everyone knows that "I ain't got none" means something different from "I haven't got any." It means that the speaker or writer (in a nondramatic context) is either ignorant of the rules of standard English or careless of them. It may indeed be severe to judge him as morally or intellectually culpable for his ignorance or his carelessness, but that is a question to be answered separately. As a sheer matter of "descriptive" truth, "I ain't got none" carries with it a meaning that "I haven't got any" does not.

Any grammarian or linguist who fails to acknowledge this difference is a grammarian or linguist who has forsaken his calling in order to set himself up as an arbiter of manners and morality, a task for which his qualifications are no greater than anyone else's. Thus we are constantly assured by grammarians of the Redgate stripe that it is perfectly okay to split an infinitive. This is like being told by a doctor that it is perfectly okay to pick one's nose. Whether or not it is okay is not a question for a doctor, but for a society's consensus on manners and morals built up, like its standard dialect, over centuries. Hazen and Redgate are untrue to their own descriptivist principles in pretending that this consensus, when it comes to the standard dialect, *doesn't* exist because they think it *shouldn't* exist.

To be sure, the consensus as to what constitutes graceful and elegant English has come under serious assault by the out-of-area specialists who are the real elitists. They suppose it is enough for them to know (and have contempt for) the rules, while lesser folk can talk and write in any way pleasing to themselves. But most of us do not take such excessive pleasure in our own idiolects and are pleased rather by successful and precise communication. Therefore we *want* some sort of rule by which that communication can be furthered. Our hope must be that one unintended by-product of these linguistically libertarian polemics will be further to entrench the old consensus as the only criterion of correctness we possess.

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Books

He told us so

by David Pryce-Jones

There was a great Marxist called Lenin
Who did two or three million men in
—That's a lot to have done in
But where he did one in
That grand Marxist Stalin did ten in.

Late and unlamented though it now is, the Soviet Union used to be a source of hope and progress in the eyes of many, and perhaps most, intellectuals. That is a truly strange phenomenon. Men and women enthusiastically abandoned the discipline of reasoning and the validation of evidence —logic itself—upon which they relied in their professional careers. Testimony from Soviet defectors and Gulag survivors did not shake them. A variety of self-deceptions were at work justifying well-publicized horrors such as the hounding of Trotsky or the Great Terror with its rigged trials and deliberately induced famine. The damage inherent in this misrepresentation cannot be determined, but this much may be said: on the one hand, apology for the Soviet Union weakened and betrayed democratic values with consequences lasting to this day, and on the other hand the victims of Communism had the added bitterness of knowing that they could not rely on those whose human duty it should have been to speak in their defense.

Something else impossible to determine is the debt that Western societies owe to those who championed democracy when it was imperative to do so, the likes of Sidney Hook and Raymond Aron, George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, individuals as courageous as they were exceptional. They challenged the hysterical illusion created by what Koestler vividly called "the thousands of painters and writers and doctors and lawyers and debutantes chanting a diluted version of the Stalinist line." Soviet spokesmen and apologists worldwide automatically decried critics as "enemies of the people" with no right to their opinion, and used to threaten them regularly with physical elimination.

The limerick above (which has found its way into *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse*, edited by John Gross) could not have been written by anyone except Robert Conquest. Note its cleverness, its playful insouciance, and above all the central telling direction that Marxism inspires murder, which alone is worth volumes of polemics. Early in the Cold War, Conquest started to expose the Soviet Union and its pretensions. Scrupulously, he weighed the evidence, which was imperfect but still enough for a considered judgment. Here was scholarship of a high order, and that was annoying enough to fellow-traveling opinion-makers and debutantes. Over and above that, he has always displayed an equanimity all his own, compounded of commonsense and humor and the belief that truth must in the end prevail. Nobody else so well conveyed the fact that those putting the Soviet case were absolute clowns, dangerous of course, but pitiful.

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Conquest was unanswerable. I well recall how bien-pensant intellectuals in the London of the Sixties could only resort to name-calling, habitually slandering him as a "fascist hyena." *Memoirs of a Fascist Hyena* was the title which Constantine FitzGibbon, a friend and admirer of Conquest's, gave to his autobiography in mock tribute.

The Great Terror in 1968, and then *The Harvest of Sorrow* in 1986, documented the crimes committed in the cause of Stalinism. Contributing as they did to the dissipation of the climate of Soviet apology, these books are historic markers. Now that the Soviet archives are to some extent open, it has also become evident that Conquest had depicted Communism in practice with an almost unerring accuracy. Scholarly scruple had sometimes led him to understate the number of victims and the enormity of what had happened. As a result, in the eyes of Russians he has become a very great man indeed, a rare spirit who cared about them and published their plight to the rest of the world.

Reflections on a Ravaged Century, as its title suggests, is a summation of the thoughts and observations of a lifetime.[1] A wise book, it is marvellously informed and further adorned with apt quotations from wide reading, some of the best from Orwell, obviously a special inspiration to him and the writer he seems closest to. Certain touches have a comic-sardonic ring about them which might have come straight from Orwell. At one point Conquest describes how in Mao's China acupuncturists stuck needles into deaf-mutes who then shouted "Long Live Chairman Mao!" American Stalinists looked at the USSR from an American point of view, Conquest notes: They did not think "hurrah for the terrorist dictator; they said, look at the Lincoln of today." Or again, Marxism in its pure form, "may soon only be found, like the spotted owl, in a few sanctuaries on the American Pacific Coast." Eric Hobsbawm, still an unreconstructed Stalinist historian, justifies himself because "although it turned out wrong, it might have turned out right."

A pragmatist, Conquest holds that proper societies evolve only by means of lengthy and often fraught processes of trial and error. Issues of personality and accidents of all sorts are in play, and politics is the medium by which consensus is reached, and change can be harnessed with as few strains as may be. The French Revolution cut across natural political evolution by introducing the "Idea," a word to which Conquest grants a capital letter. According to the Idea, utopia was to be constructed on earth by those who were able to envision it. As these select few set about instituting mankind's happiness, their will self-evidently had priority over consensus. They were to do as they pleased, and whoever stood in their way was unenlighted, therefore disposable.

Communism, like Nazism, had its origins in an Idea of this kind. The means used to institutionalize the Idea might seem rational, but the Idea itself was irrational. As Mandelstam put it in Stalin's day, "Because the trams are running, they think this is a normal society." Belief in the Idea had to be a matter of temperament. Confronted by reality in the form of some failure of the Idea, believers instinctively reinforced wishful thinking rather than reassess their motives. From the outset, there was a discrepancy between theory and practice, and over a period of time this was bound to grow more unbridgeable. The effort to unite theory and practice involved more and more deception, and when that proved inadequate for the purpose, censorship, conspiracy, murder, and war. The totalitarian state was the result.

The history of the Soviet Union, as Conquest resumes it here, was a sustained pretense that the Idea was reality. Two Soviet Unions thus came into existence, the official one in which everything was agitprop make-believe around non-achievement, and the actual one in which real life was suffered by ordinary people unable to bring anyone to account for anything. Fellow traveling

1 *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, by Robert Conquest; W. W. Norton, 336 pages, $26.95.

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and apology grew roots and flourished between these ever-widening extremes.

Did it have to turn out like this? Yes, Conquest answers, on the whole it did. Marx's Idea was false, but attractive enough to ensure that the falsity would have to be proved through general experiment. Institutionalizing Marxism, Lenin wrenched Russian society away from what would otherwise have been its natural course. Under Stalin, the Russian people had to pay the price for this. After the victory over Hitler, Stalin was in a position to force other nations, and perhaps even his former wartime allies, to pay the price too. Granted Stalin's belief in the Idea, and then his ruthless exploitation of it, the Cold War became a certainty. The Soviets might very well have won it too. Détente as they practiced it was a strategem for advancement by other means. Among useful allies, they could count on the Sartres and the Brechts, the whole choir of lesser Hobsbawms, and "peace" movements too gullible to realize that they were subsidized puppets of Moscow. On the Western side, as Conquest stresses, the problem was an inadequate conception of Soviet psychology, a lack of imagination with which to perceive what their Idea was leading them to do to themselves and to others.

In a thoughtful chapter, Conquest dissects nationalism and the forms it can take. As one among other components both of Communism and of Nazism, nationalism is an expression of "We" against "Them," allowing nationalists to switch easily between extremes which were compatible and not really in competition as they seemed to be. To the extent that nationalism glorifies the state and its nation, it destabilizes the neighbors, but Conquest approves of cultural nationalism on the grounds that it is a reinforcement of identity.

Faulty balance between nations and nationalisms disturbed the past century, and was among the factors which brought down the Soviet Union. But by the time of Gorbachev, the two Soviet Unions could anyhow no longer be reconciled, either in the mind, or by the deployment of terror. The divergence between the Idea and reality was now so absolute that it revealed how much lying there had been by everyone at all levels. Glasnost allowed Russians to say so, like the boy in the Hans Andersen tale pointing out that the emperor wore no clothes. Either from above or below, violence proved superfluous, because the Idea, collapsing, could at last be seen for what it was.

Welcome and wonderful as this reprieve was, Conquest continues in the final part of his book, the response of the West has been muted and unsure. Victory in the Cold War coincided with decadence. So many Westerners have internalized the accusations consistently levelled against them by the Soviets and their apologists that Western civilization and culture are altogether demoralized. Past contacts between the West and other nations in the world spread the rule of law, trade, and universal values, but these achievements have been sloganized into "imperialism" and "colonialism," with the consequence that what ought to be a source of pride appears instead to be something guilty in need of atonement. Art is at a dead end. Literature is an academic plaything at the mercy of political correctness. Education proved no shield against the Idea in the past, and in any case it is now more an instrument of social engineering than the end in itself which it ought to be if civil society is to continue. Clowns are again at work. Gloomy as the theme is, Conquest's humor will out, and he summons in aid a spoof study of Kingsley Amis which he published in the prestigious *Critical Quarterly*, with references to such unlikely books as *The Phallus Theme in Early Amis*, only to receive numbers of letters from English teachers and students taking all this at face value.

More dire still, an Idea is once more on the loose. The nations of Europe are engaged in some sort of union. A federation is in the making, and beyond that an empire. Another intellectual betrayal is at hand. Historically, Europe has not been a single political entity since Roman times, and

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hardly then. Its nations are divided by language, religion, law, custom, and long memories of bitter warfare among themselves. The conceivable overcoming of division gives this latest Idea its attraction, but it is based on exactly the same false lure of utopia as Communism and Nazism. The consent of its different peoples is not driving events. Wrenching aside natural political development, the will of the few is once more attempting to create a reality through the institutionalization of a bureaucracy. As in the Soviet Union, the bureaucrats themselves form a privileged nomenklatura and the electorate do not have the means to call them to account. Representative democracy and established identity are both under threat. The balance between nations and nationalisms is swinging wildly, with instability and potential violence already visible in the offing. Identity is under threat.

To avoid the further horror so evidently in store, Conquest recommends an association of the United States, Britain, and those countries which share in their language and culture, and would be willing participants. Race is no consideration. The Caribbean countries are obvious candidates. All may join who wish to. Not an Idea at all, this would be a practical measure involving no loss of sovereignty or identity, but serving to strengthen the democratic center for purposes of reviving confidence and unity, and preserving the precarious peace of the world. Such is the lesson this gifted and humane man has drawn from the past century and the evils which it leaves to the historical record. If nobody learns it, well, you have been warned.

Clear, affecting, subtle

Maeve Brennan The Rose Garden. Counterpoint Press, 307 pages, $23

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Maeve Brennan left Dublin for America in 1934, when she was seventeen. While her entire thirty years' writing career was conducted under the aegis of *The New Yorker* and while she became, both in her fiction and her *New Yorker* column and "Talk of the Town" pieces, one of the sharpest chroniclers of mid-century New York, the Dublin of her faithfully remembered childhood remained as immediate to her as her adopted city. It is the backdrop for her fictional masterpiece, the six-story cycle about an unhappy couple, the Derdons (republished three years ago in Houghton Mifflin's selection of Brennan's stories, *The Springs of Affection*), and in fact for all of her finest stories.

The Springs of Affection brought together twenty-one of Brennan's short stories, and now Counterpoint Press has done her admirers the favor of publishing the remaining nineteen, plus an impressionistic sketch from her *New Yorker* column, "A Snowy Night on West Forty-ninth Street," in a collection they have named *The Rose Garden*. Five of these stories are set in Dublin, the rest in and around New York City.

Brennan, who died in 1993 after a decade of mental illness, was not a prolific fiction writer, but she was a remarkably able one. A denizen of the shabby hotels and bars in the Times Square area, she was marvelous at evoking the impermanence and the tarnished beauty of New York, "the most cumbersome, most reckless, most ambitious, most confused, most comical, the saddest and coldest and most human of cities." Here she is, for instance, bringing to life a winter night in her chosen neighborhood:

> The little side streets that live off Broadway also live in the shadow of Broadway, and there are times, looking from the windows of the hotel where I live at present, on West Forty-ninth Street, when I think that my hotel and all of us here on this street are behind the world instead of in it. . . . It was a gray morning and the afternoon was gray, but tonight is very dark, and when I walked out of the hotel into the withering cold of this black-and-white night, West Forty-ninth Street seemed more

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> than ever like an outpost, or a frontier street, or a one-street town that has been thrown together in excitement—a gold rush or an oil gush—and that will tumble into ruin when the excitement ends.

This sort of descriptive grace can be enjoyed at length in Houghton Mifflin's collection of Brennan's journalism, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from The New Yorker*, but it adorns her fiction as well. Over the years Brennan became a master of *The New Yorker* house style, which of course had its limitations: that familiar controlled pathos tempered with irony, established in the early years by E. B. White and subsequently spreading like smallpox, could make the work of even its best writers look tailored-to-fit. When Brennan dealt with less *New Yorker*-ish, more personal material, though, she sometimes transcended all classification and rose to a very high level indeed.

The centerpiece of *The Rose Garden* is a series of seven stories set in the fictional Herbert's Retreat, a rich and social enclave on the Hudson some thirty miles north of New York, transparently based on Sneden's Landing, Brennan's home during the years of her high-flying and hard-drinking marriage to fellow *New Yorker* writer St. Clair McKelway. The stories are a sometimes awkward blend of satire and farce, with characters too cartoonish to affect us deeply. Still, they are always funny and always, on one level or another, true to the milieu and the mores they describe.

What things are dearest to the hearts of the thirty or so ladies of Herbert's Retreat? The care and beautification of their eighteenth-century houses; their views of the Hudson; their status in the community (for the world outside Herbert's Retreat hardly counts). Husbands and children, unless they provide additional status, are a long way down on the list. Misery and angst are caused, more than anything else, by social fear. Liza Frye, a newcomer to Herbert's Retreat, puts the old guard into a tizzy: "Right off, her modern furniture outraged all the other women, who had been concentrating on early American." Another woman is thrown into a fit at discovering that her husband and his first wife had had a "divine" eighteenth-century kitchen fireplace bricked over; after one cocktail too many she forces her husband to knock it open, right in the middle of a dinner party. A third, the socially aspiring young widow Leona Harkey, is so irritated by the unsightly cottage that blocks her view of the river than she marries its unsuspecting owner so that she might take possession of it and raze it to the ground.

The ubiquitous Irish maids provide a sharp running commentary on their mistresses' odd preoccupations.

> "Them and their views. You'd think it was a diamond necklace, the way they carry on about their *views*. Mrs. Giegler is just the same. The minute a person walks into the house, it's me view this and me view that, and come and look at me view, and dragging them over to the window and out on to the porch in every sort of weather. Damp, that's all I have to say about it. Damp."

The maids never miss a trick, and have a nice knack for summing up their employers. ("He's her *admirer*," the cynical Bridie says in explanation of the many weekend visits paid by the flashy New York critic Charles Runyon to Mr. and Mrs. Harkey. "He admires her, and she admires him. They *admire* each other.")

But Brennan is too canny a writer to make the maids any less foolish than their employers; "I am human," her motto might be, "and nothing stupid is alien to me." Over and over the maids artlessly expose their pettiness and vanity. The final story in the cycle, "The Servants' Dance," is a delightful tale of mutual one-upmanship between the social classes. Leona, Charles and their crowd descend patronizingly, dressed to the nines, upon the annual servants' ball: "Of course, they're honored that we come to their little party," Charles says. "Why, it's positively feudal. And whether

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they know it or not, that's why they enjoy it." It never occurs to them that they might not be irresistible. "Well, of course some of the maids must cherish secret passions," the wife of the Retreat's handsomest man observes complacently. "Poor things. How they must look forward to tonight." Finally jolted out of their habitual phony servility by such arrant condescension, the maids boycott the gentry and won't ask them to dance, inflicting much comical discomfiture.

The best character in this series is not the social climbing Leona, nor the perennial cadger Charles, but a ridiculous Irish poet who appears in only one story, a "waif" invited to Christmas dinner by a smug Lady Bountiful. Vincent Lace is a discarded friend of his hostess's father; once a popular poet and wit, his glory days are long behind him. He is intolerable:

> "My poems drive the fellows at home stark mad. . . . All that crowd thinks of is making pretty-sounding imitations of Yeats and his bunch. Yeats, Yeats, Yeats, that's all they know. But my masters are long since dead. I go back in spirit to those grand eighteenth-century souls who wandered the bogs and hills of our unfortunate country, and who broke bread with the people, and who wrote out of the heart of the people."

And yet, he has real pathos; we really pity him as he hopefully arrives at the feast "in what he imagined to be his best form—roguish, teasing, sly, and melancholy."

The Irish Vincent rings completely true in a way that the American inhabitants of Herbert's Retreat do not, and while the Herbert's Retreat stories in *The Rose Garden* are wickedly amusing, the Irish ones are real. "The Holy Terror," Brennan's first published story, tells of a dreadful old heap, the ladies' room attendant in a Dublin hotel, evil-minded, power-hungry, and hideous.

> Her rudeness passed for independence, and even for wit. Women smiled ingratiatingly at her contemptuous face in the mirror. . . . The ladies' room satisfied her and suited her. Her dislike of the women she served possessed her completely, and she watched their posturing with a hard, avid pleasure.

But the modern world, in the form of an efficient new assistant manager, is encroaching; Mary Ramsay's days are numbered. The story of her downfall is both grotesque and pitiful.

"The Rose Garden," the title story and perhaps the best in the collection, describes the secret yearnings of a grim, limited Dublin woman, proprietor of a small grocer's shop. Mary Lambert never smiles:

> she believed that people only smiled in order to curry favor. People like herself, at any rate. "People like us," she was always saying, "people like us," but she did not know what she meant, unless it was that the rest of the people in the world were better off, or that they had some fortunate secret, or were engaged in a conspiracy in which she was not included.

Yet even she has a poetic inner life: she lives for, and off, the single day every year when the nuns in a nearby convent open their magnificent garden to the public. "She spoke to no one about her longing. This was not her only secret, but her happiest one."

"The Bride" is the beautiful story of a young Irish maid who, driven to despair by the indifference of her beloved mother, marries a man she doesn't love. "The Beginning of a Long Story" and "The Bohemians" both echo stories and material in *The Springs of Affection*. The former is a subtle, gentle family tale in which Brennan draws on memories of her family and the Ranelagh neighborhood she grew up in with its small houses separated by walls and looking out, in back, onto a tennis court. "The Bohemians" is the story of an artistic but untalented couple who encourage their equally untalented son to pursue a poetic

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career, and of the son's desperate sense of loss and futility after their deaths.

Not all Maeve Brennan's stories are first-rate: this volume winds up, for instance, with some New York tales—several featuring a black Labrador named Bluebell—that are charming but insubstantial, and a little too cloyingly *New Yorker*-ish. But at her best she was one of the most affecting and subtle artists of her generation, clear, unsentimental, and occasionally heartbreaking.

Vast deception

Dariusz Tolczyk See No Evil:
Literary Cover-ups and Discoveries
of the Soviet Camp Experience.
Yale University Press, 361 pages, $37.50

reviewed by Paul Hollander

The huge and still growing literature of personal recollections of the (mostly Soviet) Communist concentration camps has not been paralleled by scholarly explorations of the same topic and its social-scientific and moral dimensions. Likewise what Dariusz Tolczyk calls the "intellectual and spiritual aspect of the Soviet camp experience" remains largely unexamined and undigested by Western intellectuals, academic and other. This lack of interest is especially striking when compared to the attention (well deserved) Nazi camps have received from Western scholars. Many possible reasons for the discrepancy may be suggested, but probably the most important is the reluctance to even come close to the moral equation of Nazism and Communism that a systematic study of the Communist camps may lead to. To be sure, these camps—including the best known ones in the former Soviet Union—were not, by design, extermination camps. Mortality rates were high, but they were not achieved by gas chambers and no "Final Solution" was envisaged by the killing of a designated group of people. This is not to suggest that the Communist camps did not serve ambitious political-ideological objectives; as Tolczyk points out, they were "laboratories established by the ultimate artist, where the material was to be transformed according to the overall artistic plan." They were considered "social medicine": "schools of labor" administered to usher in a new era and improve human beings

The Soviet (and other Communist) camps were far more ecumenical than the Nazi ones as far as the selection of inmates was concerned: anybody could qualify for admission if suspected to be an enemy of the state and the party, regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, religion, or prior political affiliation and position held. Communist camps also differed significantly from the Nazi ones in that they sought (in theory) to "rehabilitate" the wrongdoers, transforming them from enemies of the state into useful citizens through the therapy of work and ideological indoctrination. Nazi totalitarianism did not aspire to transform and reeducate the (racially defined) enemies of the state and society, but only to exterminate them as efficiently as possible. The gates of its camps were festooned with the slogan "Arbeit machts frei" ("work liberates"), but that was intended merely as a tactical deception of the doomed, just as were the showerheads in the gas chambers.

We know by now, and knew even before the fall of the Soviet Union, that the Communist camps did not rehabilitate anybody and killed far more people than the Nazi ones. Death in Communist camps was induced by "natural" causes: starvation, hard work, poor clothing and shelter in harsh climate, and non-existent or inadequate medical care. While estimates vary, the number of those who perished in Communist camps—most of them Soviet and Chinese—is somewhere between forty and sixty million. A more complete figure of the victims of the Communist systems has to include those executed by shooting, usually outside the camps in prisons or secluded forests.

There was one important similarity between the Nazi and the Soviet programs of

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purification; in Tolczyk's characterization,

> This was a new type of violence; systematic, controlled, oriented toward a goal, disciplined, and ultimately guaranteed by the great achievements promised in the future.

But unlike what the Nazis intended, the fruits of Soviet-Communist violence were to benefit the entire nation, or mankind, rather than only the members of a superior racial group. Arguably the Bolshevik violence was also a good deal less systematic and disciplined than the Nazi; it was possible both in theory and practice to survive the gulag and the mass violence associated with the purges in the 1930s. Moreover the scope of the purge victims somewhat exceeded the official requirements and expectations (abetted by the mutual denunciations of millions of ordinary citizens).

The book here reviewed is an outstanding addition to the small body of scholarly literature dealing with the Communist labor camps: their nature, perceptions, and official legitimation. By implication *See No Evil* also helps to illuminate the differences and similarities between Nazi and Communist camps and the discrepancy between their treatment by Western scholars and intellectuals. The author, a student of Slavic literature rather than politics, chose an ingenious and rewarding way for addressing the topic; he examines the treatment of the camps (and the earlier revolutionary violence) in the works of Soviet writers entrusted with the application of the party-line to the topic, a most demanding task even for writers committed to the principles of socialist realism. In addition Tolczyk discusses Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* (1962), the only work published in the Soviet Union before glasnost that raised fundamental questions that the regime could not handle even under Krushchev's "thaw."

Tolczyk's study goes beyond exposing the breathtaking falsehoods of the official literature about the camps—it is an original and illuminating contribution to understanding Soviet totalitarianism as a whole, and its ceaseless attempts to bridge the vast gap between theory and practice, ideals and realities. As Tolczyk points out, "the Bolsheviks were pioneers in their ruthless attempt to systematically reprogram and control the human sense of truth and falsehood, good and evil." The book also helps us to better understand the universal puzzle of how groups and individuals can convince themselves of the righteousness of their cause to a degree that "victimization and killing present no ethical problem" and instead "become ethically positive if done for the sake of the universal justice of the Bolshevik future." Under these conditions "the moral connotations of the words *lie* and *murder* should depend only on whose class interests they serve."

Most Westerners knew next to nothing of the Soviet camp system let alone the official efforts to redefine it—a remarkable example of the totalitarian aspiration to substitute an official, imaginary version of reality for that which can be experienced, or, as the author puts it, "to defeat experience with words." Some Western visitors taken on conducted tours of the Soviet model prison camps in the 1920s and 1930s were introduced to the official views and ideals of these institutions, but the literary efforts have remained largely unknown. Tolczyk begins by discussing works of fiction from the late 1920s which deal with revolutionary violence and portray the "executioners as tragic heroes" who overcame residual moral scruples by viewing their brutality as "tragic necessity." In one of these stories, the hero who routinely signs death sentences perceives his activity as "weed[ing] the gigantic garden, pulling out various weeds." The revolution —in this frame of mind—was "viewed as a struggle between different species." Such verbal and theoretical dehumanization of the victims helped to bring any moral scruples under control.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the camps became the focus of official literary propaganda and were portrayed as tools of

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character reform. In this period Soviet society was supposed to move "from the conflict-ridden past to the conflictless socialist future," and society was "the unruly human material out of which the Bolshevik genius . . . [was] to construct the most homogeneous, harmonious, just, and happy society on earth." Maxim Gorky was in the forefront of these literary efforts. His cheerful and reverent account of the camps on Solovki islands, along with a chronicle—the collective product of thirty-six Soviet writers—of the building of the Belomor canal are the most important sources in the book.

Finally there is the literature of the "thaw" after Stalin's death when some writers (generally unknown in the West) described the camps realistically enough but sought to portray them as somehow incidental to the essential character of the system that created them. The only inmates dealt with in these books are the innocent Communists, supporters of the system even in the gulag, whose faith in their ultimate vindication and the system's capacity to rejuvenate itself never wavers.

The contribution of Soviet writers to the official definition and glorification of the camp system by propagating the "vision of a humane, benevolent concentration camp" is one of the most repugnant chapters in the intellectual history of this century. The treatment of their activities provided by this volume has not been available before. It is morbidly fascinating that Gorky's visit to the first Soviet concentration camps located on the Solovki islands (near the Arctic circle) took place shortly after his return from abroad, from his long residence in the balmy climate of Capri and Sorrento. His impressions of the camps were part of a travelogue of the Soviet Union during 1928–29. His account helped to establish the politically correct conventions for Soviet writers for dealing with the camps. If there ever was a memorable parable to illustrate Julien Benda's notion of "the treason of the intellectuals," this is it. Tolczyk argues that Gorky—unlike the visitors from abroad

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taken to the model prisons—knew that what he was shown was a charade. Apparently the highly favorable impressions acquired during his travels in the Soviet Union were part of Gorky's effort (or bargain) to make peace with the Soviet system, aspects of which he had been critical of in earlier years. As in the case of many Western visitors, flattery and official recognition played an important part in the process. Tolczyk points out that

> Gorky was not unaware of the moral nature of the Soviet system. By choosing to assume the highest post in the Soviet literary hierarchy, he clearly consented to fulfill the political obligations attached to it.

The result was the account of his visit to Solovki, a perfect socialist-realist portrayal of the camps in which ideals and realities were fraudulently conflated: "Under Gorky's pen, life in the concentration camp could be the cause of envy on the part of the inhabitants of the ordinary Soviet reality on the other side of the barbed wire." Gorky's impressions of the typical camp guard were also memorable: "From frequent smiles the face of this man had become brighter, as if he had washed it . . . his face is good natured and his dark eyes look at people softly and with trust." Indeed. In the visitor's book of the camp he wrote:

> I am not in a state of mind to express my impressions in just a few words. . . . I would not want . . . to permit myself banal praise of the remarkable energy of people who, while remaining vigilant and tireless sentinels of the Revolution, are able, at the same time, to be remarkably bold creators of culture.

No comparable praise has been lavished (except by Himmler) on the operatives of the Final Solution.

The Belomor volume was written in 1933–34.[1] Besides describing and glorifying the construction of the canal (which connected the Baltic to the White Sea and was undertaken at Stalin's initiative), it was also an ode to Stalin. The literary project began with Gorky leading a tour of 120 Soviet writers along the length of the canal to gather personal impressions that included conversations with the prisoner-workers and guards. Thirty-six of the writers contributed to the volume. The canal that was built entirely by manual labor not only linked the two seas but also reeducated the enemies of the system, thus "overcoming the last obstacles of the past on the road to a brighter future." Nonetheless, in keeping with the character of Soviet totalitarianism, the book was banned in 1937 largely because it glorifies not only Stalin but also Genrikh Yahoda, the head of the OGPU, who had been in charge of building the canal but was subsequently purged by Stalin.

Documenting and recalling these monuments to the falsification of grim social-political realities stimulate reflections about the vulnerability of a system that was committed to and institutionalized deception and self-deception on a monumental scale. Only one critical issue arises out of reading this original and thought provoking study: that of including *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. To be sure there is nothing to quarrel with regarding the discussion of the book, its historical and moral significance, and the problems it created for the Soviet authorities who unwisely (from their point of view) permitted its publication. Rather, the problem is one of cohesion or structure: the novel does not quite belong to a volume devoted to the fraudulent official representations of the subject. This is however a minor reservation about a study that brings a wealth of new information and insight to a topic that continues to demand our moral and intellectual attention.

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1 There is an abridged translation available: *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal Between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea*, edited by Amabel Williams-Ellis (H. Smith & R. Haas, 1935).

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Letters

Howard's rendering

To the Editors:
I should like to call attention to a twice-committed typo, a very perverse typo, in my review of *The Charterhouse of Parma* (January 2000). The French quotation three-quarters of the way down the left-hand column of page 65, as given, misspells *généreux* as *généraux*. The misspelling means "general" and collaborates, as I say perversely, with the translator's misreading of the French!

Martin Greenberg
Brooklyn, NY

At the point of extinction

To the Editors:
I have never imagined it took a great deal of "close reading" to regard *The New Criterion* as a conservative publication, but as it has printed Paul Dean's comments on education (December 1999) I wonder if I need now reconsider my subscription. Mr. Dean seems to imply that practicality in modern education is gauche, and surprisingly cites its goal ("the fitting of tomorrow's citizens to live in tomorrow's world") in a pejorative vein. As I am *merely* an American, I am prevented from making an informed comment on the quality of British educational standards, but I *will* disagree with Mr. Dean and applaud them for still having standards. Mr. Dean's suggestion that knowledge is unquantifiable and that we would all be better off writing comparative essays on "the urban symbolism of Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot" is typical of the liberal ideologues now infesting English departments both here and (apparently) abroad. I myself have recently left the English department at NYU to pursue what I hope will be a more practical expenditure of $22,000 a year in the Department of Politics, foregoing a future in Graduate English largely on account of the arrogant and introverted countenance of "academics" who are indifferent to the concerns of the "outside world." I am still livid when I recall how, in my sophomore year, my professor instructed his class to write a term paper on "the Vicissitudes of Desire in the Gay Ghetto," in which we were somewhere to include a discussion of the oh-so-eloquent Wojnarowicz autobiography. But I suppose this is the kind of intellectual activity Mr. Dean would say is "vital in boosting [students'] confidence and developing their powers of expression." Mr. Dean and his colleagues should understand that for a price tag ultimately reaching nearly $100,000, if one happens to already live near the university, that is, I wish to be equipped with knowledge that a potential employer will find useful; I can boost my confidence much more inexpensively by watching an episode of "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." This is not to say that reading Eliot isn't important (it is, and I do), but I don't need someone with a Ph.D. to turn the pages for me. As Eliot himself had noted in "Modern Education,"

> The other kind of subject which provides indifferent training is that which is too minute and particular,

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> the relation of which to the general business of living is not made evident. And there is a third subject equally bad as training, which does not fall into either of these classes, but which is bad for reasons of its own: the study of *English Literature* or, to be more comprehensive, the literature of one's own language.

So I am pleased to see that Mr. Gradgrind is on the loose in British classrooms once again. If the motives of educators must now be "functionalist," and their results "quantifiable" (words that Mr. Dean uses, of course, bitterly), so much the better. With Mr. Gradgrind I can adamantly declare to him, "Now what I want is Facts. . . . Facts alone are wanted in life. . . . Stick to Facts, sir!"

John Fitzgerald
New York, NY

Paul Dean replies:

Mr. Fitzgerald strangely misrepresents me. If he knew at first hand the rudimentary nature of the GCSE examination questions he would not be quite so quick to applaud the British government for upholding educational standards.

Let me assure Mr. Fitzgerald that I am no friend to theoretical nonsense, and I share his reaction to his professor's essay assignment. But does he really think an essay on Baudelaire and Eliot is a comparable waste of time, or consider it unremarkable that an 18-year-old pre-university student should want, and be able, to write such a piece?

Mr. Fitzgerald quotes Eliot's pronouncement that the study of English literature has never been intended to "train" anybody. Mr. Fitzgerald seems to be confusing training with education, exactly like the RCA. His closing reference to *Hard Times* suggests that he has failed to see that the whole weight of that novel is *against* the utilitarianism espoused by Gradgrind. If he can't see that, then neither training nor education has been of much benefit to him.

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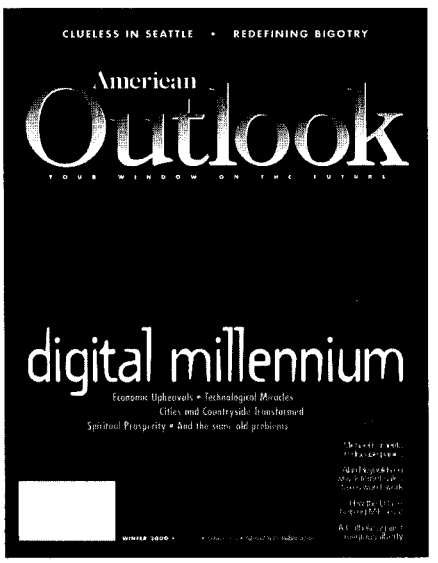
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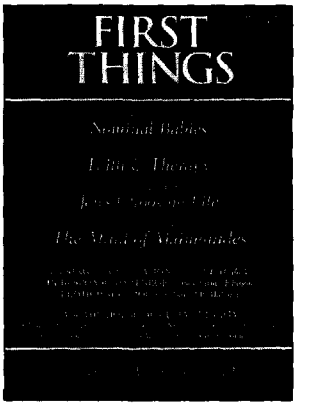

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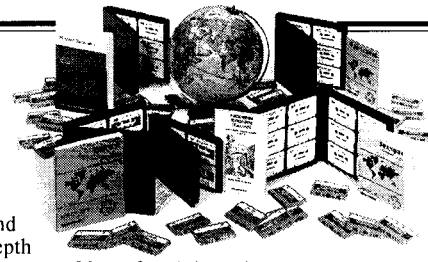

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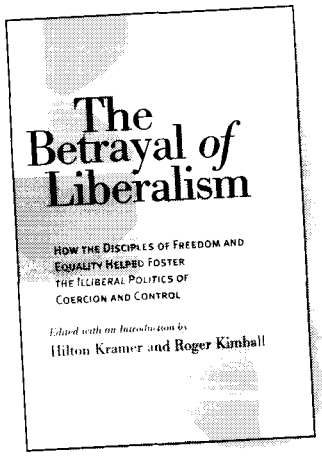
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